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FIRST LOOK AT EA'S MOVIE TIE-IN

INSIDE

FIRST LOOK:
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MORE WITH THE EARS AND THE BEARDS

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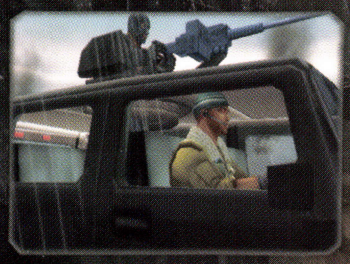

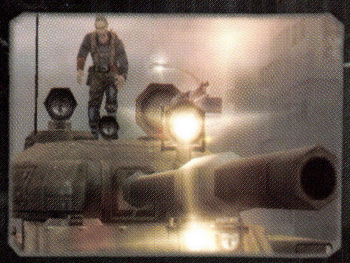

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PlayStation 2

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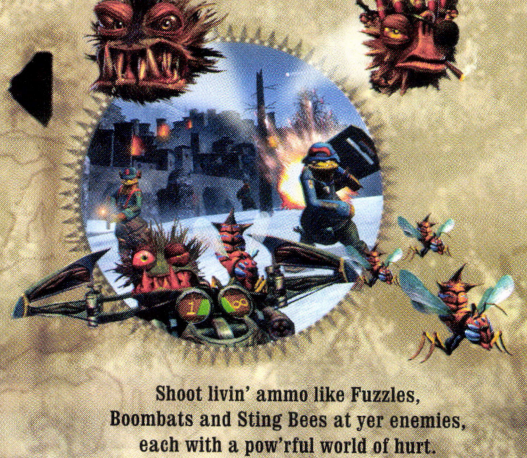

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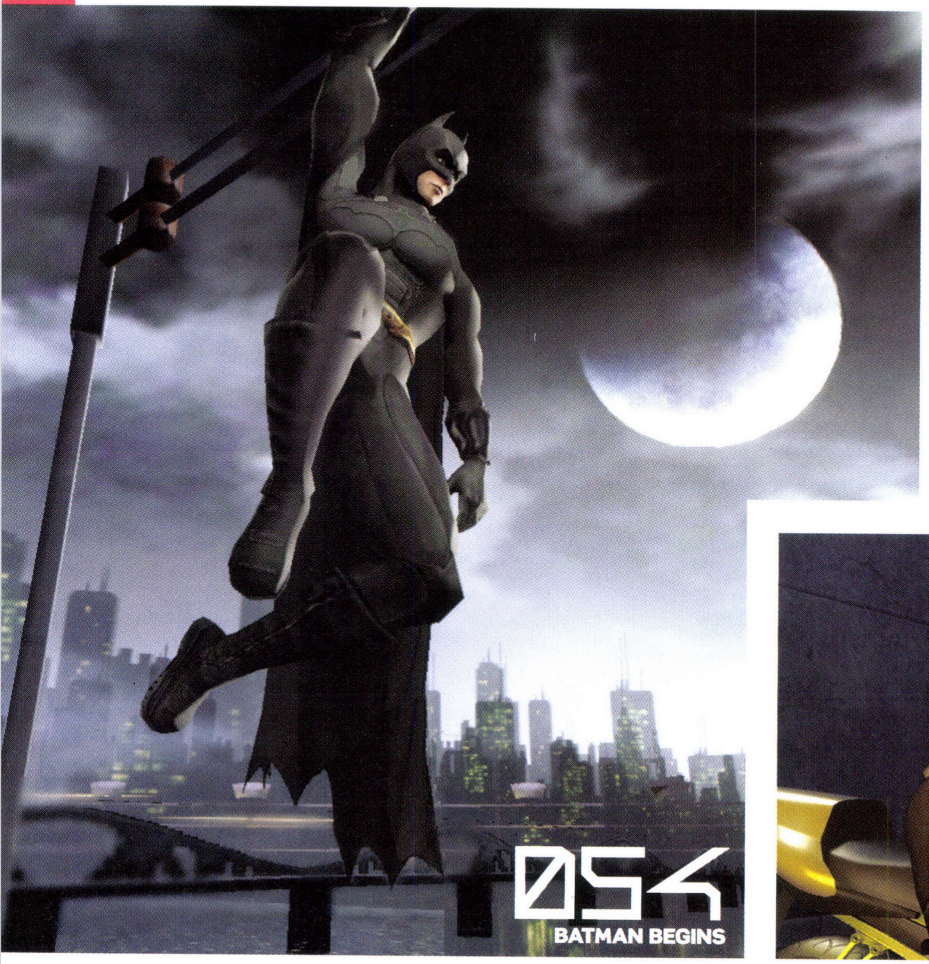

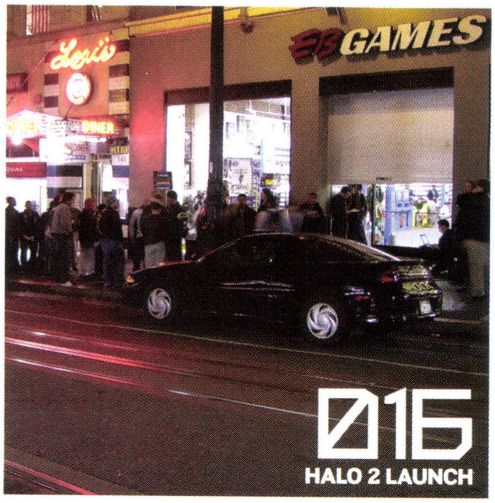

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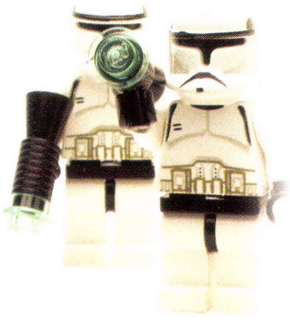

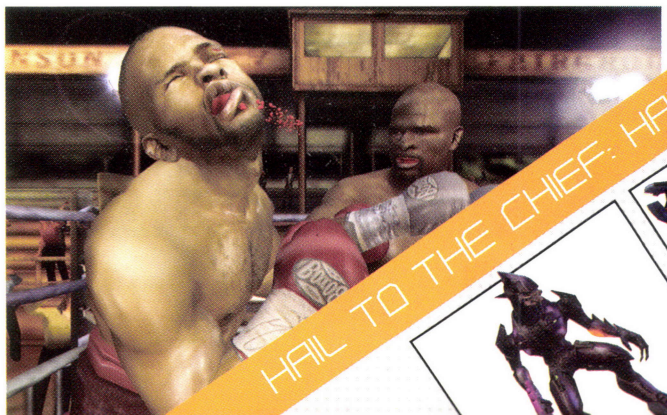

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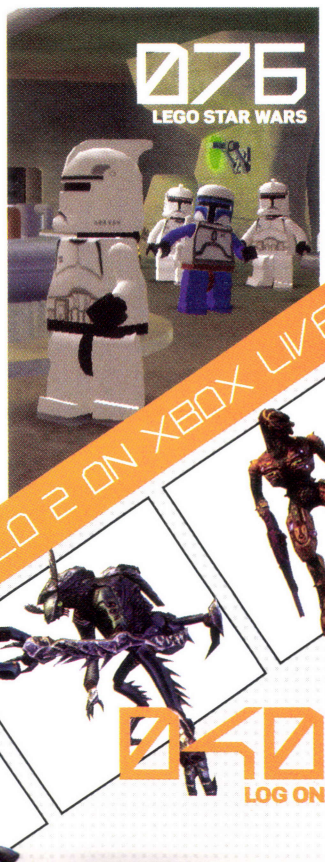
FEATURED CLUB: XBN IS STUDLY
Be you of the *Xbox Nation* or just passing through, why not stop in and say hi? Now, if you'll excuse us, it's time for our weekly Botox injection.



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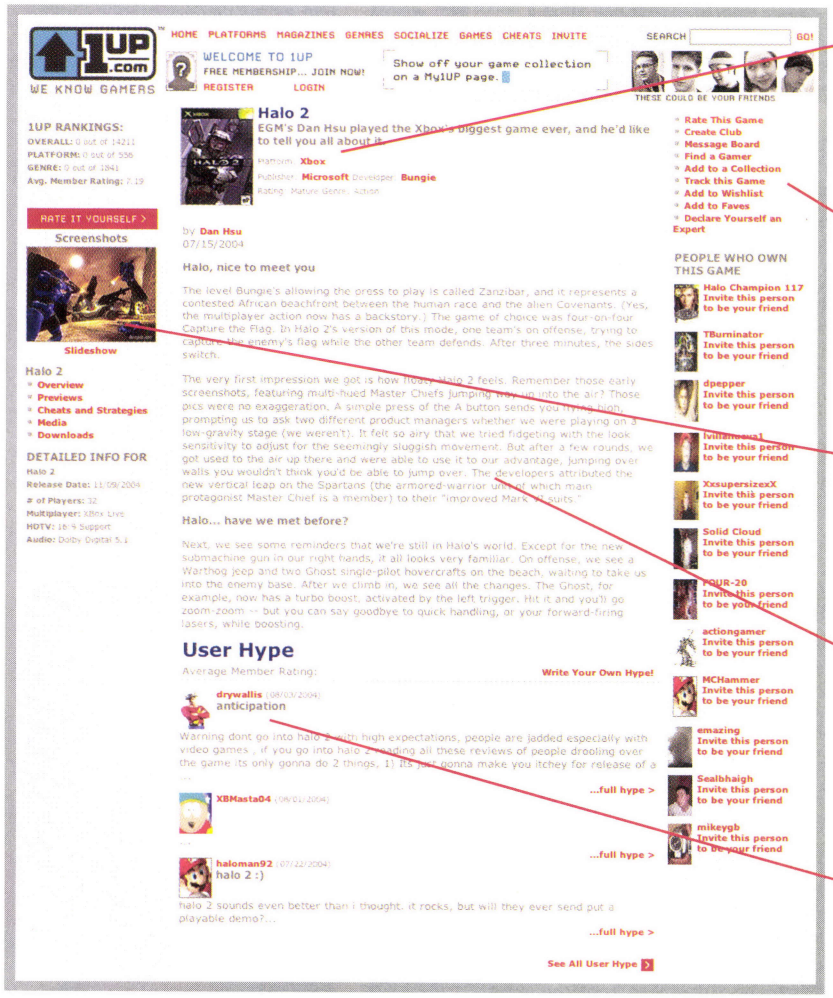

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YOU'RE SO WAYNE

Batman returns...

For my money, Batman's big-screen fortunes took a nosedive into a coffin the moment the Penguin appeared and then spent the next two movies nailing the lid shut. The Caped Crusader's videogame history is no less depressing; from the woeful Acclaim platformers of the early '90s to the more recent Kemco and Ubisoft games, Batman has spelled disaster for developers who've struggled to render onscreen anything more meaningful than a punching, kicking Bat-dummy. So, with the advent of the *Batman Begins* movie, hope springs eternal that the game license, this time from Electronic Arts (a company that makes much of its close ties to Hollywood), could finally break the curse. Our first, early look at the project starts on page 54.

And speaking of beloved series, there's yet another *Star Wars* game on the horizon. This time the combination of genuine passion on the part of the developers and a license synonymous with pure play (and with making a complete mess of your bedroom) combine to make *Lego Star Wars* a fascinating prospect.

_Simon Cox, Editor-in-Chief

SIMON COX
Editor-in-Chief

Editor-in-Chief Simon Cox came to America as part of the British pop invasion of 1812 and soon began preaching rock 'n' roll's great truth: If you can't huck the TV set out the window so it lands in the pool, you have no business wearing the KISS makeup. To his chagrin, the pumps do not work on account of the vandals who have stolen the handles.

CHE CHOU
Executive Editor

Death by misadventure, Che Chou's obituary will read after the vomit is dusted for. Of Chou, it can be said that his amplifiers went to 12, and he oftentimes was caught rockin' in the manner of the noted gadabout Don Dokken. He would also, you will be glad to note, do anything for love. But he won't do *that*, you godawful filthy cretinous wretches.

CINDY LUM
Managing Editor

It's great to be here, grizzled stadium veteran Cindy Lum is fond of saying. Also, you'll be glad to note the citizens of here really know how to rock, as compared to the enormous and unrepentant schmucks everywhere else. If only she knew where "here" was. As the man says, color Miss Lum peach and black. Color her taken aback, baby.

DAVID CHEN
News Editor

Despite the groupies, permanent crotch implants, solid-gold houses, piles of money, endless booze-soaked parties, popularity, and 30-man entourage, rockin' rocker David Chen wants you to know that he puts his pants on one leg at a time, just like you ordinary wretches. Or he would, if the hot supermodels weren't all the time stealing them.

GREG ORLANDO
Reviews Editor

Greg Orlando regrets to inform you all that he is not, in fact, ready to rock at the present time. Perhaps if you gave him another 10 or 15 minutes he would be able to adequately prepare himself. In the meantime, please try to keep the noise to a minimum. Also, and with great sadness, Orlando further regrets to inform you that no, no we're not doing f-in' Stonehenge.

ANDREW BURWELL
Art Director

Remember such charity concerts as Eradica(te) Sciatica, Rockers Against Disinterest, and Out with Gout '99? Humanitarian hair-metal virtuoso-turned-art director Andrew Burwell wouldn't be caught dead at those. He has, however, donated generously to the Grammar Society, whose efforts to eliminate Limp Bizkit and Def Leppard are tireless.

ANDREW MENDOZA
Associate Art Director

As the sixth, seldom-seen Traveling Wilbury (Scabby Joe), Andrew Mendoza taught us all to love again with his mellow power ballads including "I Want You to Be My Cirrhotic Liver" and "Lose the Pants, You Filthy Skank Ho." There is no man like him for understanding that every rose has its thorn, just like every night has its dawn.

XBN

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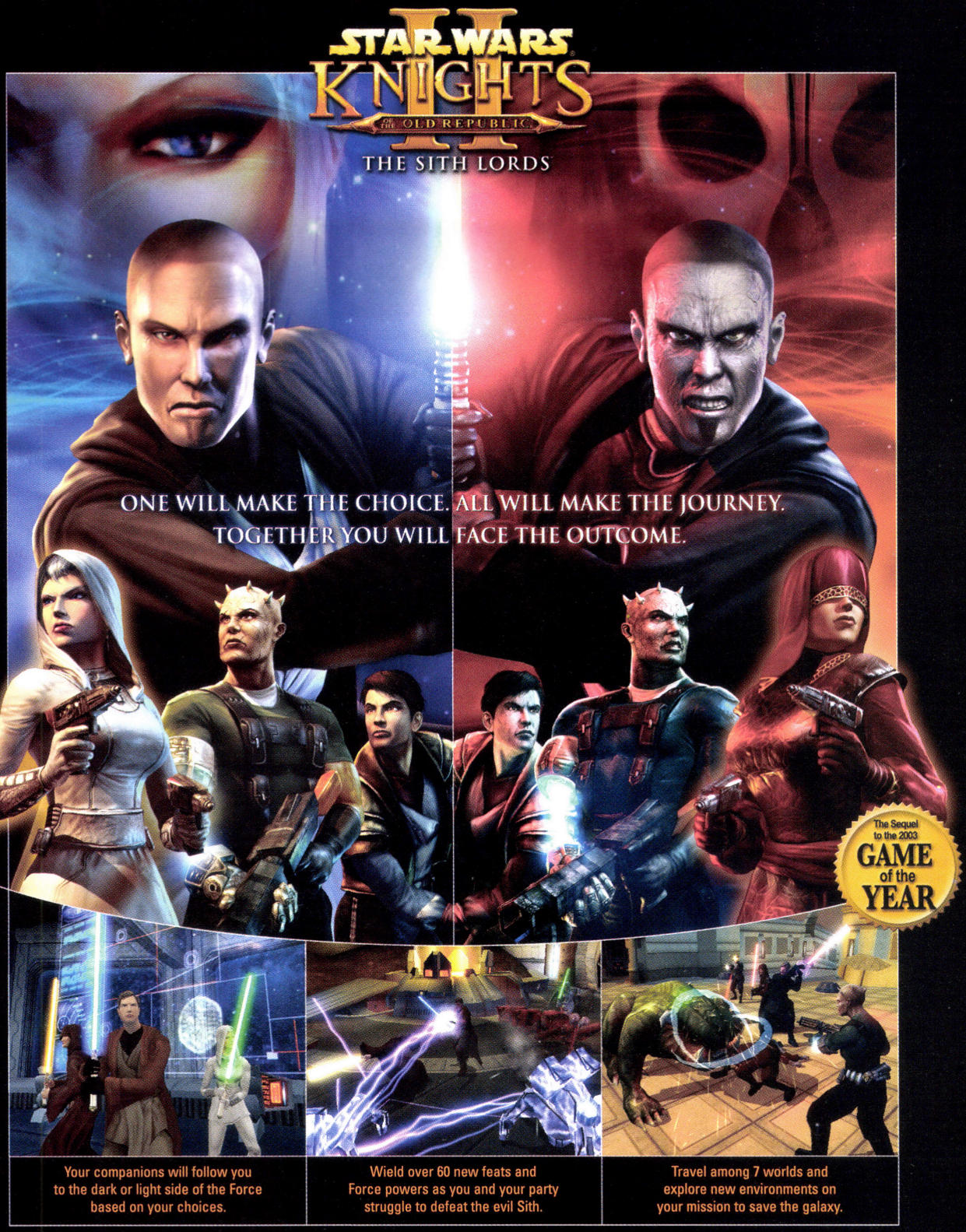

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LETTERS JANUARY 2005

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LETTER OF THE MONTH:

(Another) Attack of the Clones

I had a funny thing happen to me recently while playing *KOTOR*. I was looking through my inventory when all of a sudden a load screen came up...then my Xbox froze. Later, I was adding NPCs to my party while leaving the *Ebon Hawk* when I noticed the robot T3 was missing—replaced by an extra copy of the Wookiee Zaalbar.

I thought maybe the Xbox mixed up the thumbnails for the party. Later, on the *Ebon Hawk*, I noticed an extra Zaalbar in place of T3. I just assumed the Xbox messed up and replaced Zaalbar with T3. Later on, while I was walking through the *Ebon Hawk*, my two Wookiees became three, then four, then later five—at one point, I had six Zaalbars on the *Ebon Hawk*. They should rename the game *Attack of the Clone Wookiees*.

Joe Marszalek

That's...the best thing we've seen since the time our Master Chief model was swapped with a Covenant Elite in *Halo 2*!

WE AIM TO PLEASE

All I can say is wow. You guys covered *Halo 2* better than any website or mag. Truly, No. 1 you are. The sexy white cover with Master Chief made me yell out "Jesus Christ!" which made a lady at the mailboxes look at me very strangely. Keep on pumpin' out the goodness.

Simon Hergott

KEELHAUL THE PIRATES

I heard the bad news that *Halo 2* has been leaked. Many *Halo* fans, myself included, have done our best to support Bungie and avoid the pirated copy as well as spoilers. Piracy has affected *Doom 3*'s sales, delayed *Half-Life 2* by 12 months, and now may have ruined a good story for *Halo 2*. Even though this is a French copy with no Xbox Live capabilities, I already know its effects are snowballing.

I just wanna say to the readers that it's real easy to support Bungie. Just don't download it, don't distribute it, and then buy the game. Real simple. I hope you good folks at *Xbox Nation* can pass this on to your readers, maybe as an article in your next issue.

Bill Salem
Calgary, Alberta
Canada

Don't copy that floppy. *Xbox Nation* wholeheartedly agrees.

And the only good pirate is a salty, shanty-singing buccaneer with a peg leg, unceasing thirst for grog and burying treasure, and a red overcoat topped with a chatty parrot. Yarr!

SPOILER ALERT

Hey there, guys and gals. It's not like I've been living in a cave. I've heard of these fancy-dancy "consoles" and all the fun games that you kids can play on them. Heck, I even own one—goes by the name of Xbox. As a matter of fact, every once in a while, when I get some free time and my daughter goes to bed early, I even get to play games. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* was one that I was taking my good old sweet time finishing.

See, when you don't have much time to play games, you necessarily take longer to finish 'em. Anyhow, I was perusing a recent issue of your fine publication and stumbled upon an article about the upcoming sequel to *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. It was really interesting, a fine piece of writing, right up until the point that you SPOILED THE STINKING END OF THE WHOLE FIRST GAME! Thank you very much, *XBN*. May you forever be chased by dogs with bees in their mouths and when they bark they spit bees at you...

Sincerely,
Didn't Know I Was Revan
Aaron McConnell

P.S. Hey, you know that movie with Bruce Willis? The one with the whispering and the kid and the dead people? Listen, shhhh, I've got a secret...he was dead the whole time!

P.P.S. Revenge is mine!

Well, Aaron McConnell, you'll be glad to know the woman in *The Crying Game* was a man, *Soylent Green* is people, and Rosebud was a sled.

For the record, young padawan, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* was released on Xbox in the summer of 2003. Not to be jerks or anything, but there's probably a statute of limitations regarding plot secrets for a game that's more than a year old, is one of the most heralded game titles around, and has sold well in excess of one million copies.

IF YOU UNDERSTAND THIS, TURN TO PAGE...

I have an idea for a game Main menu that would work perfect for a game like *Fable* (and other RPGs). Instead of creating a profile like in *Halo* and other games, you would create a book. You would be able to name the book, and when you turn on your

"WHAT KIND OF WORLD DO WE LIVE IN WHERE *HALO 2* GETS MORE PRESS THAN THE NEW PARIS HILTON VIDEO?"

Xbox, you would pick which book you wanted like you pick a profile now.

There would be a bookcase, and the books, or profiles, would be selected from here. Pressing Start would open the book, accessing the Main menu. Selecting things like options would turn pages. Selecting Start Game would turn to a page number, depending on how far you were. The book would have 100 pages. Turning to page 10 would mean you had completed 10 percent of the game. The page you turned to would have a picture of the screenshot when you saved it. It would be in a medieval art style and turn into real style. Also, your book would change according to your alignment. If you were evil, it would look like an evil book. If you were good, it could be golden, and if you liked to cast spells, it would be like a spell book.
Diedra Hutchcraft

Yes.

SEPARATED AT BIRTH

Is it just me or does Simon Cox, *XBN*'s editor-in-chief, look a lot like Paulie Shore, self-proclaimed weasel?
Tim Markel

No.

FABLE TARNISHED

After reading your review of *Fable* in the October 2004 issue [#19], I'm wondering what the hell happened. It came across as a defense of the game, anticipating all the flack it's been getting since it came out. I, for one, was really looking forward to this game and had a favorable impression after playing for about 10 hours that slowly turned to disgust and rage at about hour 19, when I realized I was about ready to finish the game. There is no way in hell this game deserves a 9 out of 10!

At best, the game deserves a 7.5. Points should be taken away for it being too easy (at a certain point, it becomes almost impossible to die) and too short (I'm a mediocre gamer who puts in less than 10 hours of playing a week, and I beat it in 21 hours, finding everything), plus the quest is kind of confusing after you read the books, because they took so much out of the game. Who cares about dragons, a singing sword, and the North if it's not accessible anymore? There are so many details wrong with this game that it simply doesn't deserve such a high score.

Which brings me to one last thing. At what point in a game's life are you guys doing the reviews? Do the reviewers play through the entire game (I kind of doubt it, since you are posting reviews like two months before the game is on the shelf) or just bits that the development companies let them play?

You are reviewing games, and many of your readers are basing purchases on your reviews. *Fable* is a prime example of why a game should be played through in its entirety before a review is posted. Had I known that this game was so mediocre and easy, I wouldn't have wasted the money on buying it and just would have rented it instead.
Tony Bussert
Seattle, WA

It's *XBN*'s policy to only review finished copies of Xbox software. And in the case of *Fable*, it's to be expected there will be some debate about its artistic merits.

As for the review itself, it was written after the game was completed twice. Which comes out to about 357 decapitations, 42 marriages, 56 divorces, 34 chickens punted into next week, and 1,121 bandits killed by a pasty-white hero in Union Jack underwear.

ABNORMALITY

I should be like a normal kid and discard these ideas, but I have noticed that in the introduction to *Fable*, when the mighty hero comes and stabs the white void and has it blown up in his face, it is really a metaphor for the rise and fall of *Fable*. The warrior is Peter Molyneux, his weapon is *Fable*, and the white expanse is the market of RPGs. When Peter tries to make his mark, it backfires, as the project was too ambitious for its own good. Interesting, no less.
Brad Kraus

Who said *Fable* backfired?

SSX'S SLIPPERY SLOPE

I e-mailed Electronic Arts with no result. I was wondering if you (with all your various and incredible resources) could find out if there will be an *SSX 4* with Xbox Live play in the works?
Steven Foster

Electronic Arts' succinct response: "We certainly haven't announced any new *SSX* products."

RINGS OF PERFECTION

I can't believe any magazine would give this game a rating below 9.9.

Halo 2 is a huge leap over *Halo*.

And *Halo* is way above most games, anyway. The story line is greatly enhanced, and the war between the Covenant and humans is very similar to our current war against all this religious bull crap. I loved it.

The weapons are enhanced.

The levels are longer and change the point of view of the game. Just awesome!!

There's nothing like opening up on the Covenant with dual needlers!

I would rate this game a 10.
Steve Adams
Burbank
P.S. My advice for *Halo 3*—instead of leaving out stuff, give us a second disc with even more levels.

You'll be happy to know, Steve Adams of Burbank, that *XBN* awarded *Halo 2* with a rating of 10...happy now?

CREDIT DUE

Many of you have written to *XBN* inquiring about the artwork featured in the poster included with *XBN* #20. This supercool illustration—depicting a dusty Master Chief cutting loose on the Covenant—was created by one Zoe Brawley for Bungie Studios. But don't go knocking down their doors for your signed copy; Ms. Brawley no longer works as a designer at the house that *Halo* built. //

IT'S A MAD, MAD WORLD...

What kind of world do we live in where this game, what's it called...*Halo 2*, gets the cover, eight pages inside, and more press then the new Paris Hilton video—how about some old-school loving? *Pinball Hall of Fame* and *Pure Pinball* could use some press—I know you can't kick the crap out of aliens, but they are still good fun!

Matthew Szewczyk
Cumberland, RI

News Editor David "Medieval Madness" Chen heartily agrees. Regarding Ms. Hilton's recent onscreen exploits, *XBN* thought she stole the show in Mike Myers' bastardization of cherished childhood favorite *The Cat in the Hat*. She's, like, such a betty, bud-dy!

WE HAVE LIFTOFF!

November 9, 2004, was the biggest day in videogames since the launch of the Xbox, back in November of 2001. *XBN* hits the pavement on the eve of the record-breaking release of *Halo 2*.

"In the first 24 hours we'll have an opening that's [more] popular than any motion picture has ever had in history," Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates said of the *Halo 2* launch at a shareholder's meeting just days before the game's release on November 9.

And he was right. On its first day of release, *Halo 2* took in approximately $125 million; comparatively, Pixar's *The Incredibles* took in $70.5 million over the course of its entire opening weekend. The release of *Halo 2* represents the single biggest launch of a piece of media—movie, album, or videogame—in the history of capitalism. Across the nation, fans lined up for hours at some 7,000 planned "midnight madness" events the night before the game's official release to get first crack at the new game. According to NPR's *Marketplace*, one retailer sold 1,800 units of *Halo 2* in just 11 minutes. And so, in the spirit of commerce and dual-wielded submachine guns, *Xbox Nation* hit the streets of San Francisco and New York City on the cold, blustery night of November 8 to speak with some of the game's most die-hard fans...

FRANK CHU, San Francisco

How long have you been waiting out here for *Halo 2*?
Well, uh, I came around about a half an hour ago and, uh, I guess they're waiting for the nice new videogame over here, so I had a chance to talk to Channel 5 about my protest about Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter's involvement with 12 Galaxies not paying me as a movie star. So, uh, I wasn't really waiting for a videogame.

Do you own any videogame consoles?
No, but one time I went out to the bowling alley with some of the cameramen from NBC—they have some very good pinball games.

What do you think is better, Earth or space?
Space.

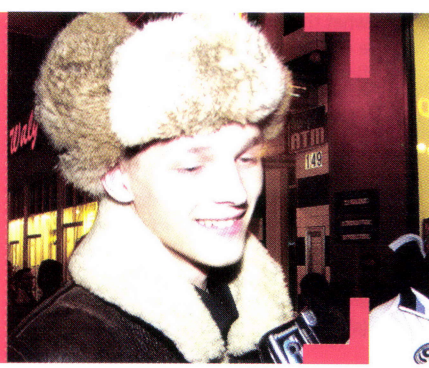
VITALIY, San Francisco

How long have you been waiting in line tonight?
Since 7:30—so, about five and a half hours.

What aspect of *Halo 2* are you most looking forward to?
Everything, the whole package. I just want to replay Halo, but with everything faster/stronger/better.

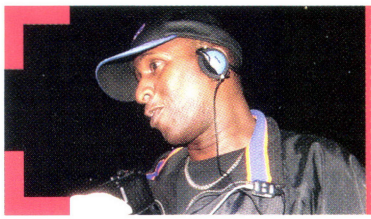
Is this the game that gets you to sign up for Xbox Live?
Yes, we just bought Xbox Live right now.

What would you prefer, to go home with a beautiful woman tonight or your copy of *Halo 2*?
Nah, man, Halo 2, Halo 2.



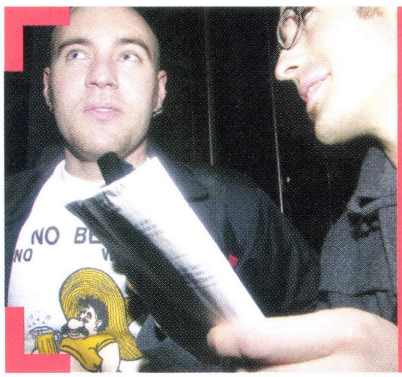
JUSTIN, San Francisco
What single aspect of *Halo 2* are you most looking forward to?
Multiplayer.
Is this the game that gets you on Xbox Live?
Yes, this is the game that gets me to sign up.
Would you rather go home with a beautiful woman tonight or your copy of *Halo 2*?
Always gotta go with the ladies first.
Can it live up to the hype?
Yeah. I've waited three years. I can't wait anymore.
Why are you in line for *Halo 2*?
I'm in line for Halo 2 so I can kill my best friends. Without going to jail.

ISMAEL, Oakland
Would you rather go home with a beautiful woman tonight or your copy of *Halo 2*?
I f***ing moved out of my house and told my wife I'm coming back in three days. It's *Halo 2*—I'm moving in with these guys, [then going] back home in three days. Women can wait—I've been waiting for this game for three years, man. I've been buying every game system that's come out in the past 15 years and *Halo* is my favorite game ever. So to me, this is it right here.
Meditation is to nirvana as *Halo 2* is to _____?
Getting to heaven or something, man.

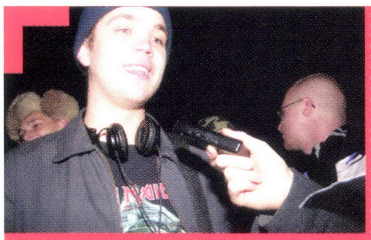


MICHAEL, San Francisco
What single aspect of *Halo 2* are you most looking forward to?
I liked the puzzles and the good story in the first game, so I hope this one has the same things going for it.
Meditation is to nirvana as *Halo 2* is to _____?
Ass kickin'.

"WOMEN CAN WAIT—I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS GAME FOR THREE YEARS" —ISMAEL, OAKLAND



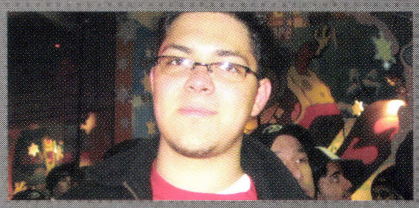
SEANBABY, San Francisco
How long have you been waiting in line?
Seventeen days.
What single aspect of *Halo 2* are you most looking forward to?
All the [action] it's gonna get me.
Would you rather go home with a beautiful woman tonight or your copy of *Halo 2*?
[Looks at beautiful woman] Both.
Meditation is to nirvana as *Halo 2* is to _____?
I didn't realize the questions were gonna be so deep...can I use [action] again?



VLADIMIR, San Francisco
If we offered you a GameCube and a PS2, would you give me your copy of *Halo 2*?
No, absolutely not. You'd have to pry it from my cold, dead hands.
Meditation is to nirvana as *Halo 2* is to _____?
Iron Maiden, baby!

XBOX LIVE FROM NEW YORK!

JOSEPH, New York
For you, has there ever been a more anticipated game than this?
No. I've been playing since the Nintendo days and I've never seen something of this magnitude.
Do you have an excuse for taking tomorrow off from work?
None. I told them I'm getting Halo 2, so shut up.
If *Halo 2* were a food, what would it be?
Ice cream.



SEBASTIAN, New York
Would you rather go home with a beautiful woman tonight or your copy of *Halo 2*?
How dare you ask that?! How dare you. The audacity. I'm appalled. That's a hard one, I really can't answer. All right, I'll say *Halo 2*.
If *Halo 2* were a food, what would it be?
Strawberries.

JOSH, New York
How long have you been waiting out here?
About four hours tonight—I'm actually stationed in Taiwan, so I came all the way from Taiwan to get this on the 9th and not on the 11th.
Would you rather go home with a beautiful woman tonight or your copy of *Halo 2*?
Well, I had sex with a beautiful woman last night, so I'll definitely take *Halo 2*.

TOP 10: XBOX BEST-SELLERS (AS OF OCT. 2004)

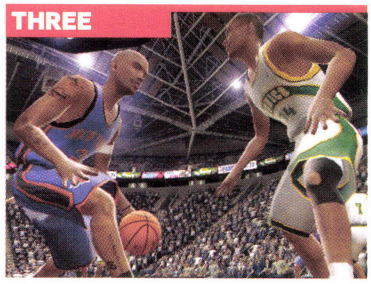
ONE

ESPN NBA 2K5
Live: **Yes** Release: **10/04** Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"*ESPN NBA 2K5* is a solid basketball game that feels great to play and looks incredible."**

TWO

MORTAL KOMBAT: DECEPTION
Live: **Yes** Release: **10/04** Score: **Five**
What we said: **"...a 3D fighting amalgamation that's no better than the sum of its parts."**

THREE



NBA LIVE 2005
Live: **Yes** Release: **10/04** Score: **Nine**
What we said: **"...tightened considerably, *NBA Live 2005* is definitely worth owning."**

FOUR

X-Men Legends
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"This is fan service—and cooperative gaming—done right."**

FIVE

Tony Hawk's Underground 2
Live: **No**
Release: **10/04**
Score: **Nine**
What we said: **"Yes, it's similar to previous *Hawk* games—but what a monster game it is."**

SIX

DOA Ultimate
Live: **Yes**
Release: **11/04**
Score: **Seven**
What we said: **"...lacks the sophistication to become a contender for the fighting-game throne."**

SEVEN

Kingdom Under Fire
Live: **Yes**
Release: **10/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"...the feeling of total control is virtually worth the price of admission itself."**

EIGHT

Leisure Suit Larry
Live: **No**
Release: **11/04**
Score: **Seven**
What we said: **"Much of the humor is sophomoric, but in an *American Pie* way, not a forced *BMX XXX* one."**

NINE

Fable
Live: **No**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Nine**
What we said: **"It's wondrous and wearisome, a great step forward in the development of heroes in RPGs..."**

TEN

Star Wars Battlefront
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"In the category of Good Clean Fun, it takes home the prize."**

DEFT...OR DAFT?

DEFT:

MS rolls out the red carpet...

Opening their doors at midnight on November 9 wasn't just good business for thousands of videogame retailers—it was good publicity. Not just for one great game, but for videogames in general...

DAFT!

Special is good

After seeing how long those lines were, *XBN* was a little disappointed to see just how many of you weren't willing to pony up the extra $5 for the collector's edition.

TOP 10 U.K.

Hey! Don't Union Jack that blood pie, mate

1. **FIFA 2005** — It's Europe, and thus OK to like soccer
2. **FABLE** — The greatest RPG on this list
3. **BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN** — Or: *Crash 'n' Burn*. But much better
4. **LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE** — The fourth age is love
5. **MEN OF VALOR** — Are we not men? We are Devo!
6. **OUTRUN 2** — You can *OutRun*, but you cannot hide
7. **STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT** — It's like shooting Ewoks in a grebnar
8. **TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 2005** — A bad walk ruined by a Tiger
9. **SONIC HEROES** — Blue bayou
10. **HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED** — And this entry? English devolved

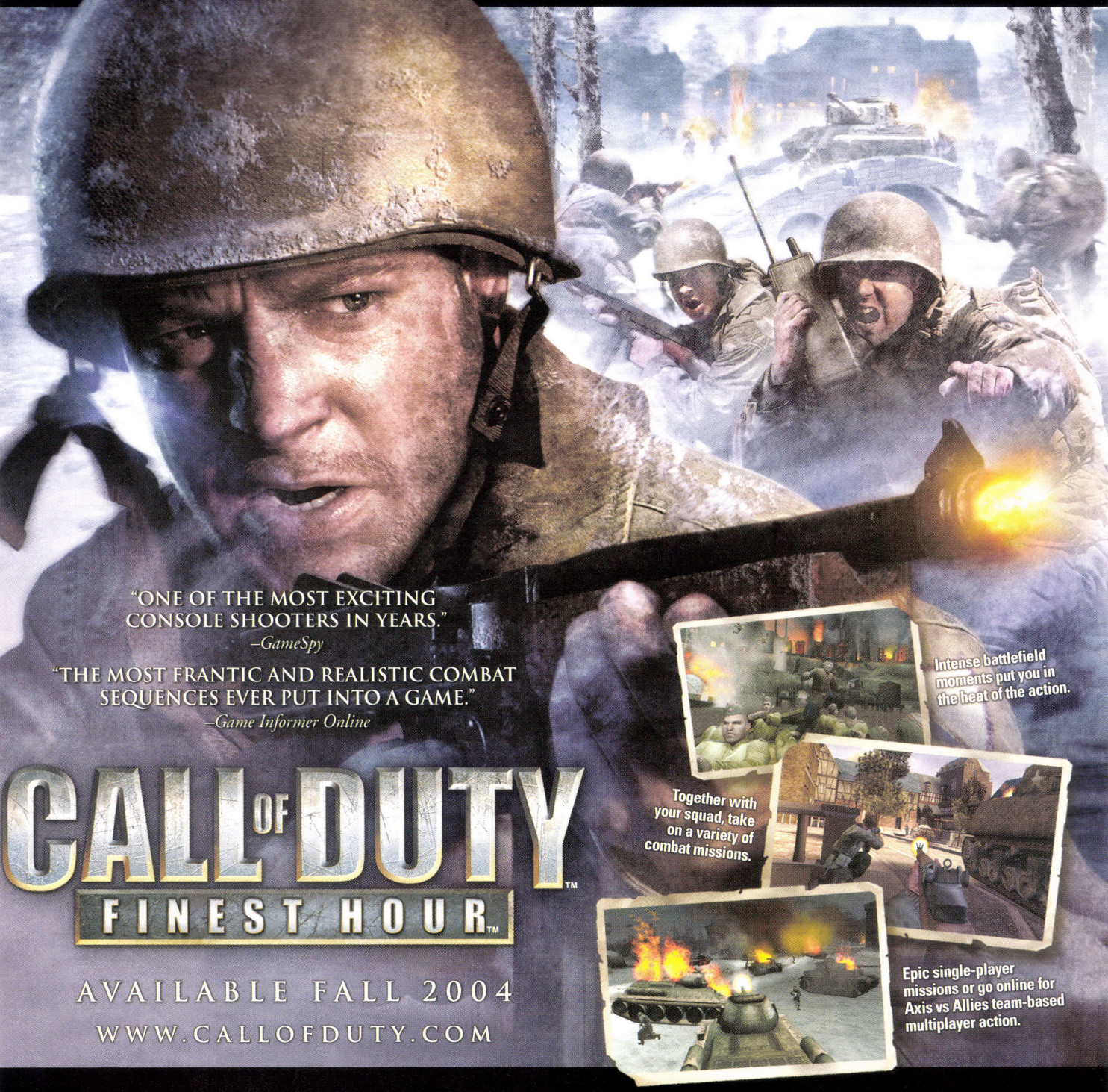
TOP 10 JAPAN

Home of fortnightly Godzilla attacks!

1. **STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT** — Weesa thinka Jar Jar estinkey!
2. **HITMAN: CONTRACTS** — Sign on the blood-dotted line
3. **SNK VS. CAPCOM: SVC CHAOS** — Chaotic mediocre
4. **FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR** — Like the Ultimate Warrior, but less fruity
5. **PHANTOM DUST** — All we are is dust on Xbox
6. **STREET FIGHTER ANNIV. COLLECTION** — Ryu and Ken were married 15 years ago!
7. **TRUE CRIME: STREETS OF L.A.** — Here's a true crime: Fat people in spandex
8. **DEAD OR ALIVE 3** — More with the breathing, please
9. **PSYVARIAR 2** — Guns gone wild
10. **GRAND THEFT AUTO DOUBLE PACK** — Hooker heaven

Numbers courtesy of Media Create (m-create.com)

THE WORLD'S DARKEST HOUR SHALL BE YOUR FINEST.



"ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING CONSOLE SHOOTERS IN YEARS."
–GameSpy

"THE MOST FRANTIC AND REALISTIC COMBAT SEQUENCES EVER PUT INTO A GAME."
–Game Informer Online

Intense battlefield moments put you in the heat of the action.

Together with your squad, take on a variety of combat missions.

Epic single-player missions or go online for Axis vs Allies team-based multiplayer action.

CALL OF DUTY™

FINEST HOUR™

AVAILABLE FALL 2004

WWW.CALLOFDUTY.COM

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Violence

GAMECUBE · XBOX · XBOX LIVE · PlayStation 2 · ONLINE BROADBAND ONLY · SPARK · POWERED BY gameSpy

ACTIVISION

activision.com

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CALENDAR: JANUARY 2005

MORE STUFF, LESS FLUFF

FORGET-ME-NOTS:

01.01.05
New Year's Day traditions include things like watching parades and eating black-eyed peas. And if an Xbox bundle just so happened to be under the tree, a complete simulation of all the bowl games with *NCAA Football 2005* would start the year out just right.

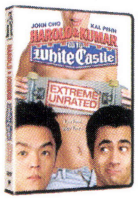
01.05.05
Could Xbox Next finally make its public debut tonight? Bill Gates delivers the preshow keynote at the Consumer Electronics Show tonight. In 2001, he used the same keynote address to unveil an almost final version of the original Xbox. If he does, look for complete coverage of the details at 1UP.com.

01.09.05
Cyber athletes are starting to make headlines now, but the very first video-game world championship was held on this date in 1983 at the Twin Galaxies arcade in Ottumwa, Iowa. Nineteen players competed in *Frogger*, *Millipede*, *Joust*, *Super Pac-Man*, and *Donkey Kong, Jr.* in the event, which was televised on ABC TV's *That's Incredible.*

01.04 TUESDAY

HAROLD & KUMAR

FORMAT: DVD // STUDIO: WARNER HOME VIDEO



Before the holidays end, two DVD releases offer a last-minute getaway. For a quick trip, travelers can drive through ***Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle***, which is from the director who helped Jessie and Chester find their damn car. More adventurous types will want to strap on the loincloth and armor and join Brad Pitt in ***Troy***.

01.05 WEDNESDAY

PROJECT: SNOWBLIND

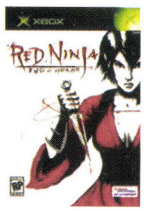
PUBLISHER: EIDOS // DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

It might have begun life as *Deus Ex: Clan Wars*, but ***Project: Snowblind*** arrives today with an identity all its own. Even *Ex* poster boy J.C. Denton would be impressed by the firepower and bioenhanced gadgets that make for furious combat both offline and on...

01.05 WEDNESDAY

RED NINJA: END OF HONOR

PUBLISHER: VIVENDI // DEVELOPER: EUROCOM ENT.



...of course, if all those guns and gizmos aren't your speed, consider ***Red Ninja: End of Honor***, starring (scantily) crimson-clad ninjette Kurenai. ***The Fast and the Furious*** and ***Predator: Concrete Jungle*** are also in stores today.

01.12 WEDNESDAY

ODDWORLD STRANGER

PUBLISHER: EA // DEVELOPER: ODDWORLD INHABITANTS

Stranger things have happened, but the next ***Oddworld*** title is more likely to appear later this spring than at this early date. The same holds true for ***Pariah***, the next title from the *Unreal* guys, which should provide a nice little break from *Halo 2* later this year. In the meantime, ***The Punisher*** is on hand to dish out third-person maximum pain, vigilante style.

01.12 WEDNESDAY

MERCENARIES

PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS // DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC

North Korea might not be San Andreas, but military hardware gives ***Mercenaries*** plenty of punch. When the time comes for a little R&R, nothing beats football and foot, uh, massages: ***NFL Street 2*** and ***Playboy: The Mansion*** are also available today. Other new recruits shipping today include ***Tork: Prehistoric Punk***, ***Stolen***, and ***Ford Mustang: 40th Anniversary Edition***.

01.14 FRIDAY

ELEKTRA

FORMAT: THEATRICAL // STUDIO: 20TH CENTURY FOX

Daredevil may swear its Greek, but Elektra Natchios still sounds suspiciously more like a microwavable snack food than a superhero. Regardless, this spin-off does squeeze Jennifer Garner back into her skintight leather costume. Which, for plenty of you, will surely prove reason enough to suffer the outrageous slings and arrows of modern moviegoing.

01.14 FRIDAY

ALIENS VS. PREDATOR

FORMAT: DVD // STUDIO: 20TH CENTURY FOX

A dynamic duo of DVDs that look and sound remarkably like videogames are due out today. ***Alien vs. Predator*** is a sci-fi title bout that PC gamers have already had a good taste of in two first-person shooters. Didn't see it in theatres? You chose...wisely.

01.14 FRIDAY

SKY CAPTAIN

FORMAT: DVD // STUDIO: PARAMOUNT

For quality thrills, consider, instead, the lusciously lavish ***Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*** which harkens back to the good old days of gee-whiz fun. Xbox flyboys will be amazed at how strongly it evokes the retro-futuristic style of *Crimson Skies*.

01.26 WEDNESDAY

MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB

PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR // DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR

Frankly, it's getting harder to get excited about street racers, but the ability to cruise around in a custom Escalade might get people to pick up ***Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition***. ***Close Combat: First to Fight*** should make it to retail today as the last of the holiday soldiers to storm store shelves.

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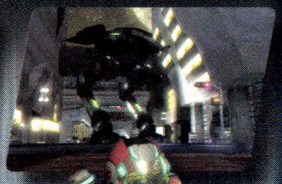
ONE MAN. MANY WEAPONS. INFINITE DESTRUCTION.

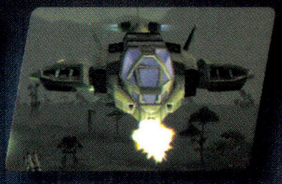
Microsoft game studios

DAVE STUDIOS

fasa studio

TEEN
T
Blood
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB





In MechAssault 2 you are one of the last members of the Wolf Dragoons and you are no longer confined to a BattleMech®. Scale a wall or jack a BattleMech with the BattleArmor, jump into a tank or fly the VTOL to carry supplies into battle. Galactic supremacy is the reward in Conquest mode on Xbox Live, as you enter a persistent online world; join one of five houses on 45 planets and, with your clan attempt to conquer the solar system. With new enemies, new weapons and new environments, the choice is yours. MechAssault 2. The biggest battle just got bigger.

xbox.com/mechassault2

MECHASSAULT 2 LONE WOLF

XBOX

it's good to play together

XBOX LIVE

WHERE'S WARREN?

Deus Ex, *Thief* creator slips into the shadows...

Warren Spector has left his position as studio director at Austin-based Ion Storm. Eidos, the publisher that owns Ion Storm, issued a brief statement with little information: "Warren has chosen to pursue personal interests outside the company, but he will continue to work for Eidos as an IP consultant."

Spector began his career as a game guru at Steve Jackson Games and TSR, makers of many popular pen-and-paper RPGs and board games. He then moved on to Origin Systems, where he worked on many titles during the golden age of PC gaming, including *Ultima VI*, *Wing Commander*, *Ultima VII: Serpent Isle*, and perhaps his most distinctive effort, the groundbreaking *System Shock*. Next, at Looking Glass Studios, he produced *Thief: The Dark Project*, which popularized stealth gameplay on the PC, as *Metal Gear Solid* did in the console world. In 1997, Spector joined Ion Storm, where he made *Deus Ex* and its recent follow-up, *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. Until the announcement of his departure, he was hard at work on *Thief IV* and other unannounced Ion Storm titles.

As an intellectual property consultant for Eidos, Spector will continue to offer advice on his signature franchises, *Thief* and *Deus Ex*, and probably the new *Tomb Raider* game being developed at Eidos-owned studio Crystal Dynamics. As for the "personal interests" Spector may be pursuing, rumors abound that a *Deus Ex* film project is in the works—who better to ensure the movie doesn't go awry than the franchise's creator? Others believe that Spector is in negotiations with Midway to lead its new development house, Midway Studios Austin (formerly Inevitable Entertainment, makers of *Area 51*). In the absence of any official word, however, these speculations remain entirely unconfirmed. //

KOOLBRICKS

Master Chief is little in Japan

Microsoft Japan has yet again tapped the hip Tokyo scene to help promote the Xbox in Japan, this time inking a deal with hot toymaker Medicom that christens Master Chief as the newest pop-culture icon to be molded into plastic and welcomed into the company's growing line of Kubrick figurines. Despite standing a mere two inches tall, Master Chief oozes badassness, wielding dual M7/caseless submachine guns.

Microsoft's partnership with Medicom yields only 4,000 Master Chief figures, which will be up for grabs as part of a contest for owners of *Halo 2*. The Japanese edition of *Halo 2* includes a 12-digit serial number that can be registered online at Xbox.jp for a chance to score an ultrarare Master Chief Kubrick—and an easy avenue to some quick cash. (Kubricks designed by musician U.N.K.L.E. and Japanese artist Hiroshi Fujiwara exceed $100 a toy in online auctions.)

Kubrick toys have risen in popularity over the past two years with a unique lineup of characters from movies, syndicated anime shows, and now videogames (*Metal Gear*'s Solid Snake made his Kubrick debut in Tokyo last winter). Although Tom Cruise from *Minority Report* and the X-Men have all been Kubricked, the toy line has stayed clear of the mainstream, thanks to Medicom's reluctance to mass-produce its toys, opting instead to build hype (and thus free advertising) by releasing toys in limited quantities.

Winners of the Master Chief figurines will be notified on January 18, with inflated eBay listings for the pint-sized prized toy soon to follow. //

News Bits

Easy to chew, easy to swallow

SOUND & VISION

Game music concert series announced
Award-winning sound and music composers Tommy Tallarico and Jack Wall have announced plans for a live concert tour featuring musical clips from some of videogaming's greatest hits, including *Metal Gear Solid*, *Myst*, *Splinter Cell*, and *Tomb Raider*. A full orchestra and choir will accompany video clips; costumed actors and lots of lasers make this one to watch for in 2005.

'CAUSE I SAY SO

Eidos lets loose
After accidentally announcing something called *Just Cause* in a recent quarterly financial report, Eidos has owned up to a few more details. Whatever it is, it's an action game coming out next year from a new Swedish developer, Avalanche Studios, which will be making its console debut with the project. It's an original creation of some kind or another, but other than that, you'll just wait and see.

STRANGE DAZE

Oddworld Inhabitants' latest effort rechristened
Not one to gamble with success, EA has announced that the funky first-person shooter *Oddworld Stranger* has been renamed *Oddworld Stranger's Wrath*. *Wrath* marks developer Oddworld Inhabitants' first foray into the first-person genre, and the game is the first *Oddworld* title to emphasize combat over communication. Check back next month for the review.

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POP QUIZ

We name their influences. They tell us if we're right...

Xbox Nation chats with Sammy Studios' Kouki Sadamori, and finds there's nothing wrong with sibling rivalry between beat 'em ups.

ABOUT: POP QUIZ

Each month, *XBN* pops the quiz on an Xbox game designer. We show our guest a series of screenshots and let them identify the game. We then ask them to comment on that game's relevance—if there is any—to their own work. By discussing various external influences, we hope to gain insight into their own creative processes.

1 STREET FIGHTER III: THIRD IMPACT

Capcom Arcade/DC/PS2

KOUKI SADAMORI: Oh no, which one is this? *Street Fighter...*

Xbox Nation: *Three: Third Impact.*

SADAMORI: You know, no fighting-game developers can deny the influence of *Street Fighter*. In my opinion, nothing has taken a huge step away from the *Street Fighter* formula. Sure, *Guilty Gear: Isuka* has four players and *Virtua Fighter* is in 3D, but they are all just different takes on the ideas that *Street Fighter* introduced.

XBN: Would you say *Street Fighter* is the *Guilty Gear* series biggest rival?

SADAMORI: You could argue that it's our competitor, but I look at *Street Fighter* like an older brother. *Guilty Gear* is the kid brother looking at what it can do better than its big brother.

2 SAMURAI SHODOWN II
SNK Arcade/PC/NeoGeo

SADAMORI: It's *Samurai Shodown*, just not sure which one.

XBN: For the record, it's *Samurai Shodown II*. We chose this because, like *Guilty Gear*, SNK games have a really hardcore fan base.

SADAMORI: Capcom's *Vampire* series, which also has a small but dedicated fan base, was more of an inspiration, though. As for *Samurai Shodown*, it didn't influence us much, but it did introduce weapon-based fighting, which, of course, is featured in *Guilty Gear*.

GUARDIAN HEROES

3 Treasure Saturn

SADAMORI: I've seen this game, just haven't played it.

XBN: It's *Guardian Heroes* for Saturn. Like *Guilty Gear*, it has great animation...

SADAMORI: Our animation doesn't stem from influences from other games, but more from manga and anime. A lot of guys on our staff are huge movie and comic buffs. For example, when *The Ring* came out, we all went out to see it, and when our artists returned to the office, they were drawing up designs for undead characters that limp along in battle. The same thing happened with the release of *The Exorcist*. Influence from movies like that hangs around the office for weeks and really impacts our games.

DEAD OR ALIVE ULTIMATE

4 Tecmo XB

SADAMORI: *Dead or Alive*. I love the *DOA* girls, especially their faces and their, er, well, you know. [Laughs]

XBN: Do you think online fighting games are the future of the genre?

SADAMORI: Well, maybe not in Japan. Arcades are still popular, and people like

going there for two-player fighting. In America, it's a different story. The arcades aren't so good, and the country is more spread out, so online is very important for Western gamers.

XBN: How did your team get *Guilty Gear X2 #Reload* to run so smoothly on Xbox Live?

SADAMORI: At first, doing all the programming for the network play and managing the servers seemed like too much work, but Microsoft stepped in and wrote some really nice net code for us. From start to finish, it took us only about three months to implement the online portion, and we had only one guy in charge of programming in the code from Microsoft. Just one guy.

5 MORTAL KOMBAT II
Midway Arcade

SADAMORI: *Mortal Kombat II*. It brings back so many good memories. I was really into this one.

XBN: A rare example of a good fighting game out of America.

SADAMORI: It did come to Japan, but it was censored heavily. I imported the U.S. version because I was pretty disappointed with the censored Japanese one.

XBN: How important is the American market for *Guilty Gear*?

SADAMORI: I think we have about 10,000 core fans in the States, as compared to about 30,000 in Japan. It probably has a lot to do with the decline of arcades in America. I think most Japanese who buy *Guilty Gear* on Xbox and PS2 are fans of the arcade version.

REVOLUTION X

6 Midway Arcade

XBN: This game...probably wasn't released in Japan. Any guesses?

SADAMORI: Sorry, but I haven't played

this one.

XBN: It's *Revolution X* starring Aerosmith. What can you tell us about the heavy-metal music in *Guilty Gear*?

SADAMORI: From the beginning, we wanted to avoid using keyboards and computers to make the music and use real instruments. And a lot of our staff is really into rock music.

XBN: Not just rock, but '80s heavy metal, more specifically...

SADAMORI: It's pretty retro, yeah. The music and the CD jackets from '80s bands influence *Guilty Gear*, not only the game's music. As for producing the music, we don't have just one band. Depending on what style we want for the game, we organize different musicians for each song.

7 SOUL CALIBUR II
Namco GC/PS2/XB

SADAMORI: This is such a beautiful game, *Soul Calibur II*. I think a lot of *Guilty Gear* fans left our camp for a while when this game hit arcades. In truth, I'm a bit jealous of this game. [Laughs]

XBN: Why? Because of its sleek and oh so sexy graphics?

SADAMORI: Not the graphics so much as the way the fighters move. The way fighters get knocked down and do counters from the ground looks so fluid. Namco must have done an incredible amount of research to get the animations to run so smoothly.

XBN: What are the chances we'll see a *Guilty Gear* running in three dimensions?

SADAMORI: That's something I'm thinking about right now, but the timing just isn't right. We're thinking about doing that for the next-generation consoles, actually. //

ABOUT: GUILTY GEAR

After two false starts, including an unreleased 3D prototype and a near-forgotten PlayStation game, Arc System Works turned 2D fighting on its head with *Guilty Gear X*, which stormed the Dreamcast and Japanese arcades in 2000. Throwing down the gauntlet in front of Capcom and SNK, *X* challenged them to match its high-resolution artwork and aggressive, well-balanced gameplay.

So far, neither rival has stepped up to equal them, while *Guilty Gear* has kept moving forward through the *XX* sequel and the tuned *#Reload* upgrade. A hit in Japan, *Guilty Gear* remains one of the few legitimate challengers to *Street Fighter*'s dominance of the American arcade tournament scene.

ABOUT: KOUKI SADAMORI

Prior to joining Arc System Works, Kouki Sadamori worked as a game designer at SEGA's arcade division for six years, porting arcade titles to the SEGA Master System. There, he worked on several games including the *Wizard's Harmony* series (Sega Saturn), *Guilty Gear X*, and the Xbox ports *Guilty Gear X2 # Reload* and *Guilty Gear Isuka*.

XPRESS INTERNATIONAL

XBN GLOBAL NEWS NETWORK

U.K.

WARTHOGGED

Warthog, the developer of *Mace Griffin Bounty Hunter* and *Starlancer*, may not be carrying the flag for space combat simulations much longer. It's been snatched up by an unusual suitor—Tiger Telematics, the Florida-based company that's currently backing the Gizmondo GPS/cell phone/handheld gaming system. Warthog will be a premier developer for the handheld, with 12 games and more development tools in the works, meaning it probably won't be doing much console or PC work anymore.

U.K.

B.C. = BEEN CANCELLED

After falling off the radar for a good many months, Lionhead's prehistoric adventure *B.C.* resurfaced one last time in October...with news of its cancellation. Or indefinite suspension, at least, since Lionhead's announcement claims it may be pulled out of the deep freeze someday. What's interesting about the news, though, is that it means Lionhead may have an unannounced game planned, since a recent trumpeting of new venture-capital funding mentioned that the money would fund a total of four projects—*Black & White 2*, *The Movies*, *Unity*, and...well, something else, perhaps.

FRANCE

BEYOND KING & KONG

Normally, news of another movie-licensed game wouldn't be all that big a deal, but Ubisoft is bringing out its big development guns to create a multiplatform title based on *King Kong*. Michel Ancel, of *Rayman* and *Beyond Good & Evil* fame, will head up the adaptation of the 2005 giant-ape remake (to be directed by Peter Jackson, coming off the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), while staff from Ubisoft's capable Montreal studio will also have a hand in things.

LONDON CALLING: XBOX IN THE U.K.

Andy Hartup
News Editor
XBM

Regular readers of this column are aware that last month I was responsible for playing devil's advocate in favor of EA's Christmas lineup. Well, this was before two poignant experiences that changed my attitude: a three-day review session of *Halo 2*, and an awful afternoon with EA's *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent*. So, to prevent the angry letters from folks who took a dislike to my defense of the gaming giant, allow me to respond to my own column.

Dear Mr. Hartup,

Having read your column in *XBN* Issue #21, I felt that I should write in and let my opinion be known. As a keen reader of the magazine for some time, I was greatly distressed to see such inflammatory rubbish in the publication I have grown to trust. Having read your upbeat piece on "giving EA a break," I rushed out and bought both *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* and *Need for Speed Underground 2*—names I was certain that I could trust.

I was appalled to find that little or no effort was applied to these titles to make them suitable for release on the Xbox, as they are identical to the PS2 versions owned by my friends. *GoldenEye* makes no attempt to look, play, or even sound impressive; the racing engine in *Need for Speed Underground 2* is woefully flawed; and driving is less fun than in any other racer I've played. It would seem unfair to criticize EA for its aggressive Q4 release schedule if the games met a certain quality standard, but, let's face it, most of them are drivel or rehashed updates.

You state that EA has created a market for games, and that its success has driven the industry forward. More money does not necessarily make for a healthier industry, and the continued success of larger studios is squeezing the smaller, independent developers into bankruptcy. Surely franchises and updates are stifling the creative process, as they lessen the need for developers to be original in order to generate revenue. Thanks to EA, the market is filled with the sort of games that stifle the industry.

If console owners are bombarded with ads for *FIFA* or *Need for Speed*, they become less aware of the quality intellectual property that other publishers are trying to release. The result is small sales for more original games. Sure, more consoles are sold to accommodate the public's growing interest in videogames, but this is only creating a demand for the surface-over-depth titles those consumers see in ads. The gamers who appreciate original IP and quality games already have one or more consoles because they want the exclusives that first-party publishers are so keen to promote. You can keep your *GoldenEye* and your *FIFA*—a girl's sport, by the way. Look me up on *Halo 2* Live and I'll kick your ass. //

FRANCE

AROUND THE WORLD

Microsoft's "Xbox World Collection" of Japanese releases seems to be a rather counterintuitive marketing gimmick—it's a lineup of games specifically marketed as not very Japanese. Xbox owners looking for something exotic (by Asian standards, anyway) can pick up two more additions to the series next year, though: Activision's *X-Men Legends* and Ubisoft's *Rocky Legends* will try their luck in Japan next January. But with *Dead or Alive Ultimate* moving only 40,000 units in its first week of Japanese release...well, you do the math.

JAPAN

THE SILENT ROAR

It's hard to say whether the *Bloody Roar* series has fallen off the map completely, but Hudson did suddenly close down the franchise's official site—Bloody-Roar.com—in mid-November, with only a brief message of thanks to its remaining fans. It would be no surprise to see *Roar* go, since its developers at Eighting are doing much better lately making mobile games and licensed projects for Bandai.

JAPAN

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

In good news for import fans, the first Japanese print run of *Street Fighter Anniversary Collection*—released a good four months before the American version's February arrival—runs without a hitch on American Xbox consoles. That's not such a good thing for Capcom USA, though, which would probably like to move as many units as it can next year, so it's no surprise that reports of a retail recall in Japan surfaced right after the no-region-code news.

TOKYO TRIBE: XBOX IN JAPAN

It feels deviant to sympathize with the world's richest company, yet you can't help but pity the Japanese Xbox division at Microsoft. Over the past few months, Microsoft has taken some big steps to become a major player in Japan. It brought over *Grand Theft Auto Double Pack* in July, the shockingly good *Phantom Dust* in September, and *Dead or Alive Ultimate* in November. And still, Xbox hardware sales continue to hover around 400 units sold per week; some weeks, sales even dip below the 200-unit mark. (Nintendo moves around 6,000 GameCubes per week.)

As Microsoft surely knows, Japanese gamers offer a few consistent reasons when asked why they don't invest in an Xbox: The hardware is too big, there aren't enough role-playing games, and it is far too expensive. That last reason—the idea that the Xbox is overpriced—has tarnished the console's image here; many Japanese equate Xbox with a high-end gaming machine similar to the wallet-busting Panasonic 3DO, which launched at 54,800 yen ($515!) way back in 1994.

FAST FACT

34
OUT OF 40

The score *Halo 2* received from Famitsu Weekly magazine in Japan.

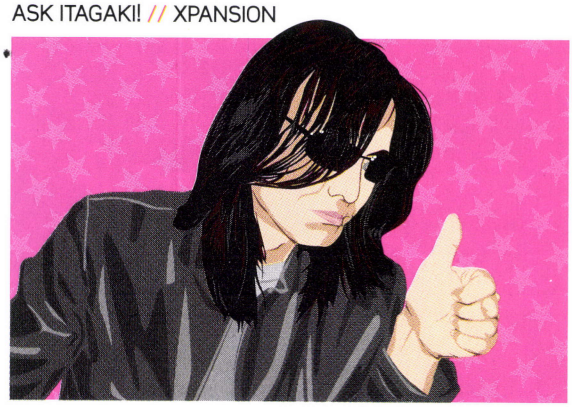
In reality, the Xbox is more affordable than the PlayStation 2 or the GameCube. Most of the big-name titles, from *Halo* to *Otogi 2*, are budget-priced at around $25, yet few Japanese realize this. (This is solely the fault of Microsoft Japan's public relations group, not the Japanese public, by the way.)

In an attempt to prove once and for all that the Xbox is affordable, Microsoft has readied a brand-new bundle pack—this can be interpreted as either an aggressive move or an act of desperation. The Platinum Pack 3 hit retailers November 18. It includes an Xbox, the DVD playback kit, and four games—*Halo*, *Top Spin*, *Project Gotham Racing 2*, and *Blinx 2*—all for about $170. It's a bargain, to be sure, but will it heat up sales this winter?

Probably not.

The truth is, Japan is a quagmire. And where the Xbox is concerned, it's a parallel universe where logic and reason can be clouded by a hazy mist of xenophobia and haphazard marketing. Only in this country do you have gamers complaining about the price of the Xbox, yet thousands lined the streets on November 27 to pick up copies of *Dragon Quest VIII* (a PS2 game) for $90 a pop. //

Ryan Payton
Writer
Tokyo, Japan



板垣 大解剖
ASK ITAGAKI!

Tecmo's head ninja answers your questions!

Q: Every weekend my high-school buddies and I get drunk together. Thing is, I hate the flavor of alcohol, but I'm embarrassed to tell my friends that. Will I ever develop a taste for booze?
A: If you keep on drinking, you'll start to enjoy it.

Q: My ex-girlfriend just wants to be friends, which means that she wants me to listen to her talk about her new boyfriend. When she does this, what can I do—besides hanging up on her—to make her understand I don't give a flying crap?
A: Why are you even wasting your time on such a trivial subject? Just walk away from her. Why can't you think like this?

Q: My roommate keeps eating the food I buy for myself. Aside from electrifying the refrigerator or strangling him, what can I do?
A: Don't be so cheap. Let him eat as much as he wants.

Q: I'm turning 30 in a few days and feel like I've accomplished nothing with my life. How can I motivate myself to do the things I really want to do?
A: Keep on thinking about it until you turn 40 years old.

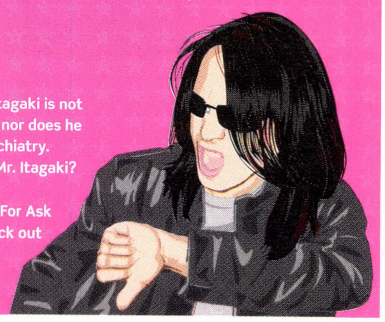
Q: How do I know when it's time to quit my job?
A: Why should I know? Do what you want to do.

Q: Will the Japanese ever get into FPS games?
A: Sure.

Q: My girlfriend wants me to quit smoking or drinking—one or the other. Which one would you concede?
A: You fool! If she asks you to die, are you going to do that, too?

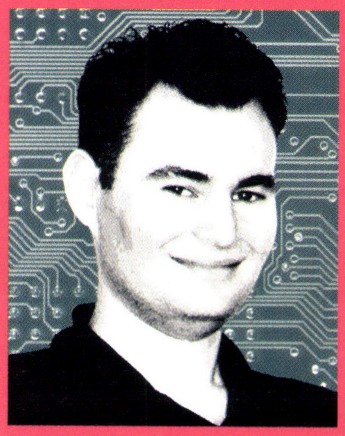
Q: What do you think of *Katamari Damacy*—best game ever or kids' stuff?
A: I have no interest in such a game. Besides, I haven't even seen the game.

Q: I feel some office sabotage is in order. What sort of evil pranks do you recommend to lighten the mood?
A: All you lazy bastards should be destroyed. //



Tecmo's Tomonobu Itagaki is not a licensed therapist, nor does he have a degree in psychiatry. Have a question for Mr. Itagaki? Just e-mail us at XBN@ziffdavis.com. For Ask Itagaki archives, check out askitagaki.1UP.com.

XPANSION:
KEEPING YOUR XBOX WORKING



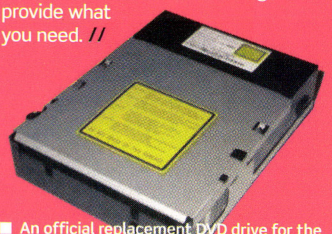
Shortly before this issue went to press, Microsoft was sued in Los Angeles by an Xbox owner alleging his unit's DVD drive is defective. The suit asserts that the plaintiff's Xbox stopped reading discs of any sort "after minimal usage" less than a year after purchase. Making the case more interesting, he claims that other Xboxes are affected with the same problem, and he wants to sue on behalf of all Xbox purchasers. If Microsoft loses, it could be forced to refund money to millions of people, including you.

But let's say you have this problem and don't want Microsoft's money—you just want to get back to enjoying your Xbox. Thankfully, you have options. For around $10, you can buy a generic DVD cleaning disc or get one made specifically for the Xbox. But be warned: Don't put one of these into your drive unless you're having problems, because you might create an issue that didn't exist. In my experience, these discs rarely fix serious problems, but they're sometimes worth trying.

The next alternative is to pop open both your Xbox and its drive, fidget around with the lens, mirror, and/or laser in the drive, and hope they all work when you're done. Guides on how to make these adjustments are available online. Even though this is a cheap solution, it's considerably more complicated than you might guess, and we don't think it's a particularly good idea unless you're experienced with electronics.

Probably the best choice is to replace the drive. If you're still under warranty, definitely have Microsoft do it and don't open the Xbox yourself. But if your warranty's expired, official replacement Xbox DVD drives are available online for $50 and up. You'll also need a Torx 15 screwdriver to open your Xbox and pop the replacement drive in, which is pretty easy, and it leaves your Xbox looking as good as new.

One last and more difficult choice is to buy a PC DVD-ROM drive and connect it to your Xbox, a choice favored by hackers who want to expand the Xbox beyond factory specs. When finished, your Xbox, with its replacement DVD brain sitting on top of the case, will look like a kind of Frankenstein. But if you buy a compatible drive, open it up, and tweak it the right way, you'll have a machine that reads virtually any DVD, CD, or game disc you throw at it. This'll take tons of work and cost more than an official Xbox drive, but it might provide what you need. //



■ An official replacement DVD drive for the Xbox will set you back $50 or more.

The DVD drives inside of Xboxes differ by manufacturer and the shape of the tray.

All natural resources have been exhausted, enemy alliances are strong, and everyone is fighting for what is left. The end of the world is near. You are a renegade soldier, equipped with the ultimate mech weaponry. Your prime mission is to save what is left by taking down enemy armored tanks in strategic co-op play, or head-to-head combat. Play with up to 8 players via Xbox *Live* and battle in 3 different modes of online combat. The future is in your hands…are you ready to fight for it?

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www.TECMOGAMES.com

BOOK CLUB

Can't read Japanese? Just look at the pretty pictures...

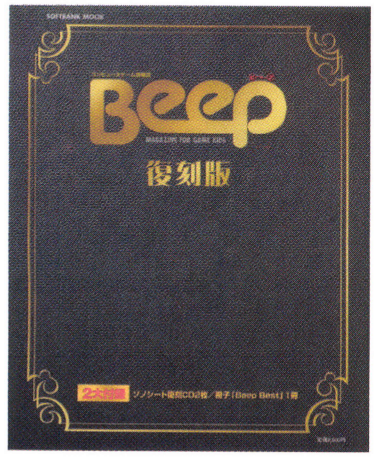
CAPCOM DESIGN WORKS: EARLY DAYS

¥2,520 // 206 pg // 26x21 cm
www.animebooks.com
Spanning more than 200 colorful pages, this art book offers a glimpse at the design process behind some of Capcom's most beloved series (*Ghouls 'N Ghosts*), as well as some rare oddities (*Higemaru*, *Top Secret*). Artworks from the *Street Fighter* series fill almost half of the book, offering a detailed look at the evolution of its characters and how they've grown and superdeformed over time. Colorful spreads of classic game box art near the end of the book completes this killer package.

ABOUT: OTAKU

Tokyo's Akihabara district may have lost its luster in recent years, but it's still the best place in the world to find game-related merchandise and the *otaku* who lust for it. *Otaku*—meaning "one who stays home"—is an epithet for the obsessive enthusiast who'll shell out for anything and everything related to his beloved hobby.

Videogame art books are a staple for those who want to go beyond the game and immerse themselves through the pages of a book. Most books, including the ones here, are import friendly, with glossy pictures taking precedence over wordy text.

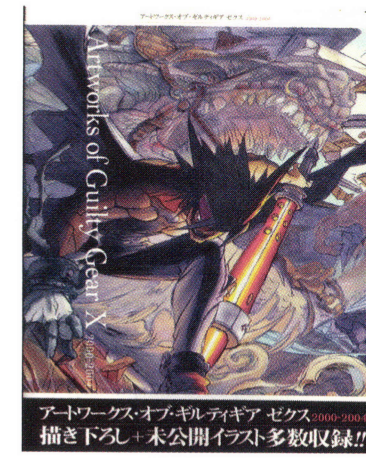


BEEP: REVISITED

¥2,500 // 256 pg // 26x21 cm
www.amazon.co.jp
A fantastic look at the long-running magazine and the enduring Japanese game industry. *Beep: Revisited* goes way back with vibrant photos of its first issue, when Hudson's *Nuts & Milk* was king and *Super Mario Bros.* was still a fetus at Nintendo HQ. The package includes two CDs filled with retro gaming tunes from *R-Type*, *Super Hang-On*, *Final Fantasy II*, and *Gradius*.

FAMITSU XBOX

¥680 // 114 pg // 26x21 cm
www.play-asia.com
Through some kind of black magic (or expensive bribes), the editors of *Famitsu* pack in more news and exclusive stories than you ever thought possible for a magazine about Xbox in Japan. Every issue includes a nice gift, from 2-foot-tall cardboard cutouts of *DOA* vixens to a region-free *Phantom Dust* demo disc (meaning it will run on your Xbox without voiding your warranty).



ARTWORKS OF GUILTY GEAR X: 2000-2004

¥2,940 // 159 pg // 30x21 cm
www.animebooks.com
Only in the midnight carnival can '80s heavy metal and yo-yos look this cool. Hundreds of color prints and brilliant black-and-white sketches make up this tribute to five years of *Guilty Gear* wackiness. Illustrations of *Gear*'s brawlers eating ramen, practicing self-mutilation, and toying with sapphic love make this the perfect gift for loved ones.

19 Tournaments, 20 locations, 179 field layouts, 145 pieces of licensed gear and more!

14 Top Pros Including: Greg Hastings, Rocky Cagnoni, Alex Fraige, Keely Watson and more!

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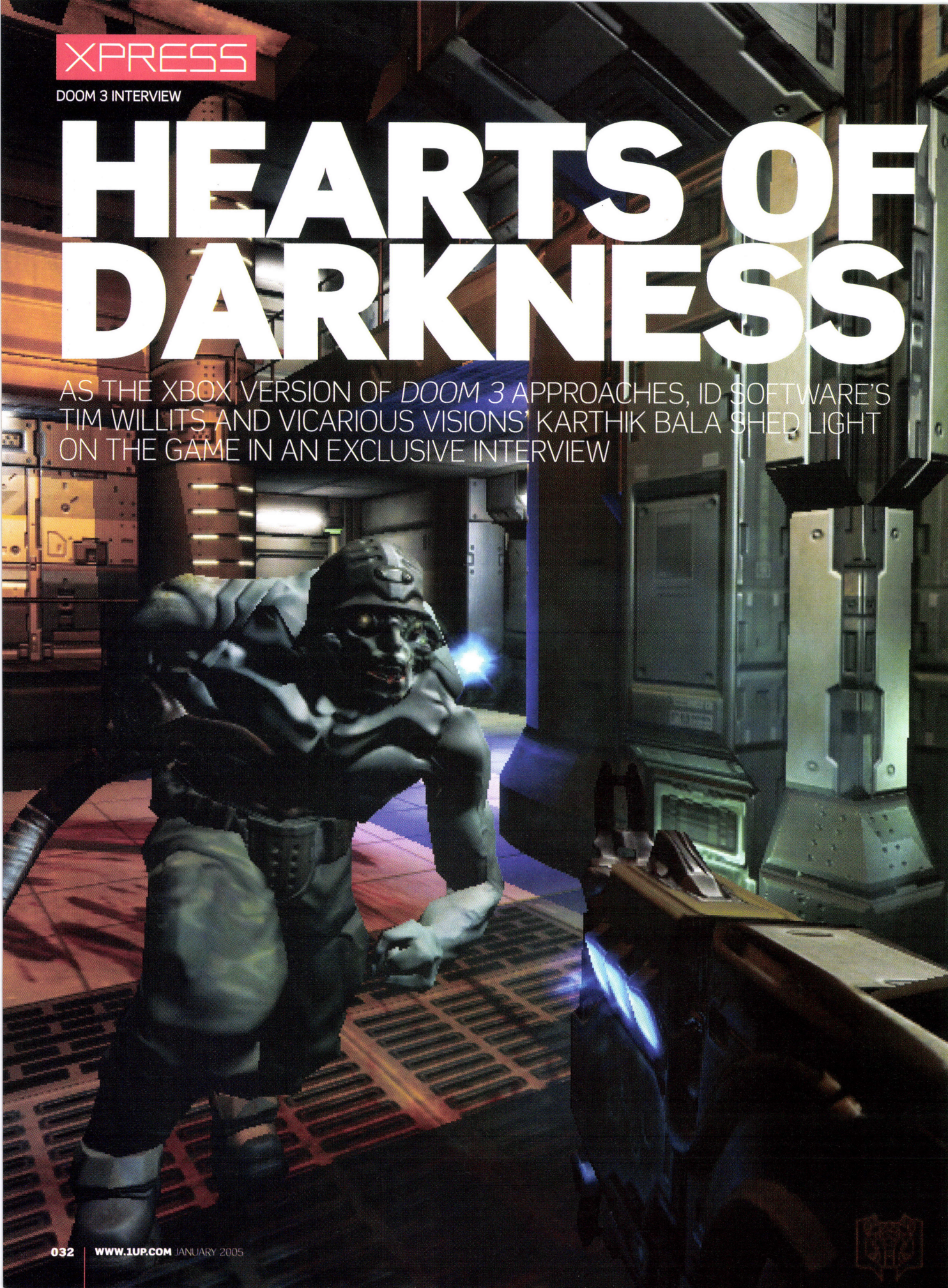
TEEN
T
Mild Language
Mild Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

HEARTS OF DARKNESS

AS THE XBOX VERSION OF *DOOM 3* APPROACHES, ID SOFTWARE'S TIM WILLITS AND VICARIOUS VISIONS' KARTHIK BALA SHED LIGHT ON THE GAME IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



Texas-based Id Software stunned the PC community last year with its announcement of a follow-up to one of the most beloved franchises of all time. *Doom 3* scored big when it was finally released, and now it's a mere two months away from the Xbox, thanks to a much-modified port from Vicarious Visions. In advance of our exclusive review next issue, *Xbox Nation* quizzed two of the creators...

XBOX NATION: In creating the Xbox port, what were the primary advantages and disadvantages of working with the platform?
KARTHIK BALA: I'd like to first clarify that *Doom 3* for Xbox is not really a port of the PC version. There has been far too much changed and added, including a large two-player Xbox-exclusive co-op campaign, for this to be properly characterized as a port. *Doom 3* was always intended to be on the Xbox, and the PC version and Xbox version have been in simultaneous development. *Doom 3* for Xbox [was] designed as a console experience with a lot of features tailored for consoles.

The Xbox is a very capable machine, and in fact, when John Carmack began working on the *Doom 3* engine, his target platform was the Xbox hardware, and in particular the Xbox graphics hardware. With 64MB of RAM and a 733MHz CPU, the Xbox doesn't have quite the horsepower of the higher-end PCs, but working with a "closed" system allows us to specifically customize the assets and code for the Xbox. We've modified almost all of the content, from textures and animations to geometry and gameplay.

XBN: Did you have to make many changes, graphically?
BALA: The more important point is what hasn't changed in terms of graphics—and it's truly an amazing feat. By using bump-mapping on every surface, demons, weapons, and even the surrounding architecture have depth and detail that changes as light moves and shadows are cast from explosions, muzzle flashes, flashlights, and a world full of moving lights. The unbelievable graphical detail is one comparison with the PC that we don't mind, because it's all there—every detail.

XBN: Specifically, what's been Id Software's role in porting Doom 3 to Xbox? How much of the feat was accomplished in-house at Vicarious Visions?
BALA: *Doom 3* for Xbox has been a collaborative effort between Id Software and Vicarious Visions. At VV, we're particularly proud of our optimization work—the low-level coding, like custom pixel and vertex shaders, sound system work, and other systems that have all been designed or restructured specifically for the Xbox version. We've also worked closely with Id in revisiting gameplay, combat, design, and asset optimizations to ensure the game runs smoothly. We are also delighted that Id Software has contributed custom content, including the co-op campaign. It really shows the degree of their commitment to the system and the people that are waiting to play *Doom 3* on their Xboxes.

XBN: Did Vicarious Visions get a chance to create anything original for the game? A new weapon, a new level?
BALA: The *Doom 3* atmosphere and gameplay are fantastic regardless of platform, and we have approached the project with the attitude that a majority of people are going to play the game on either the PC or the Xbox but few will play both. Therefore, we've focused on taking the *Doom 3* technology and game assets and creating the best Xbox game available.

Doom 3 for Xbox does include an Xbox-exclusive two-player co-op campaign, in which two players can team up over Xbox Live or system link and battle through a specially designed co-op campaign. The designers at Id Software created this campaign after *Doom 3* was released, and we've worked together to incorporate the code and other elements necessary to make it work. It's an excellent experience and really gives the two players a chance to work together in blasting through the UAC base.

XBN: In terms of the new multiplayer mode, what does it take to create a good co-op experience? And how much was Id involved in designing the co-op campaign?
WILLITS: It's most important to design a co-op experience that plays great for both players, with puzzles and combat situations that require cooperative play. You can't simply take the approach of "Let's take the single-player game designed for one player and just drop in a second player." Consequently, we've created a stand-alone co-op campaign that is a retelling of the *Doom 3* story with two central characters: two marines who arrive at the UAC base together. Cut-scenes and voiceovers have been redone to feature the two marines, and the gameplay is more fast-paced than the single-player campaign. With lighting playing such a big part, it's incredibly fun to have one player use the flashlight to illuminate areas while the other player mows through demons and zombies.

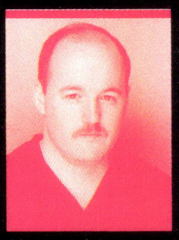
This isn't a splitscreen co-op experience like other games. You connect with another player over Xbox Live or system link and play together, each of you with the full view on your own TV. When both players have the communicator, you just can't beat the fun of blasting through *Doom 3* with a friend.

XBN: An expansion pack for the game was just announced with support for up to eight players online. Can we expect the same for Xbox?
BALA: *Doom 3* multiplayer has been crafted for a four-player experience on the Xbox, and it is extremely fun over Xbox Live with the communicator. It's difficult to explain the impact that the real-time lighting and shadows have on multiplayer gameplay, but it adds a fantastic dynamic. You can compete in pure deathmatch, team deathmatch, last man standing, or tournament modes.

XBN: Will there be Live updates, like the PC expansion pack that features new weapons, monsters, and a story campaign?
BALA: We've built in the support for downloads and updates via Live, but we're focused on putting everything that we can into the retail product. We'll consider additional content down the road, but aren't going to hold anything back just to make it downloadable.

XBN: How long has it taken to make the game? What's been the biggest challenge so far? And what has turned out better than expected?
BALA: It has so far been about a year and a half in development, with most of that in parallel development with the PC game. A substantial amount of time and effort have been put in to ensuring that *Doom 3* is the best shooter on the Xbox. Id has created a stunning experience on the PC that really does blur the line between real-time gaming and CG movie-quality visuals and sound. This has really been the biggest challenge: to preserve all of that visual and audio fidelity.

XBN: The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay came out of nowhere and took the Xbox crown for best graphics earlier this year. Do you feel that Riddick and to some degree Halo 2 steal Doom 3's thunder? And how did you feel about Riddick's attempt to push the FPS genre beyond just being a shooter?
BALA: It's great to see a number of games push the FPS genre in new directions. It's excellent for the industry as an art form and always good for gamers. *Doom 3* pushes the genre in a number of ways. Its visual quality is unmatched on the Xbox or any other platform. There isn't another game on the market that uses real-time lighting, shadows, and bump-mapping to the extent that *Doom 3* does. It simply looks better than any other game out there. //



ABOUT: TIM WILLITS

Tim Willits is the co-owner of Id Software, and worked as the lead designer and director of the blockbuster *Doom 3*, released in August of 2004 to critical acclaim. Previously, Willits helped lead design for *Quake II* and *Quake III Arena*; he's currently hard at work on *Quake IV*, currently in development at Raven Software.

ABOUT: KARTHIK BALA

As CEO and Chief Creative Officer, Karthik Bala has led Vicarious Visions since its inception in 1994. Bala has over 40 published game titles to his credit across an array of platforms, and has worked in programming, art and animation, marketing, and public relations.

MEGABITS

Coming soon to Xbox

Survival of the Fittest?

According to a posting on U.K.-based developer Rare's website, its forthcoming Xbox platformer *Kameo: Elements of Power* has been pushed back. Citing "several changes and new features (some minor, some not so minor)," the posting encourages the rabid fans of Rare to be patient, although a revised release date has yet to be revealed.

FORZA

After logging hundreds of laps around Laguna Seca in *Forza*, we have a statement to make: *Forza* may very well out-*Gran Turismo* *Gran Turismo* in terms of accurately re-creating what it's like to drive a car on a racetrack. So how can an upstart game like *Forza* possibly trump the so-called Ultimate Driving Simulator? Easy: The Xbox controller's analog triggers allow for far more nuanced input than the PS2's analog buttons, and you'll need all that finesse to stay on the track.

Sure, casual racing-game fans can leave all the driving aids on (traction control, antilock brakes, etc.) and post some good lap times, but turn those options off and *Forza* becomes a truly demanding racing sim. You'll have to feather the brakes to avoid locking your wheels, then squeeze the right trigger just enough to power through the turn—too much and you'll understeer off the track; too little and, well, you drive like a grandma. "The physics simulation is so realistic," Lead Game Designer Dan Greenawalt says, "even road surfaces change as tire marks form real-time racing grooves through every turn." Sound tough? It is, and it requires intense concentration (*MotoGP* fans will know what we're talking about here), but when you get a turn just right, you really feel it.

Microsoft is also talking up *Forza*'s "Drivatar" A.I., which will enable you to train computer-controlled drivers that mimic your own racing style, suggesting that *Forza* may also have some race-team management aspects. "[Drivatar] is an actual learning A.I. system," Greenawalt says. "The drivers the player will face in the final game learned how to drive by observing the developers, testers, and designers who worked on *Forza*."

Details of *Forza*'s online career and multiplayer modes remain scant, but at the very least we know it'll be online...a claim that the "Ultimate Driving Simulator" can't make. //

DATA
PUB: **Microsoft** DEV: **Microsoft** REL: **Spring 2005**

MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB EDITION

There's no question that the custom-car scene has exploded within recent years. Just turn on the television or glance at a magazine rack and you'll find no shortage of custom rides replete with fancy rims, blinding paint jobs, and interiors that put most home theater systems to shame. Numerous publishers have released games based around aspects of the custom-car scene (the tuner aspects of it, most specifically), but Rockstar embraces nearly every aspect of counter-car-culture with *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition*.

While you'll have access to every sort of car you might find in a movie like that Vin Diesel flick—you know, that one about fast, furious, frisky felons—*Midnight Club 3* offers a broader range of vehicles to choose from, including muscle cars like the '64 Impala or the hulking Hummer H2. Naturally, each class of cars controls a little differently than the others: An SUV obviously has more weight than your standard car and, as such, generally isn't as maneuverable as something like the Chrysler 300C, but it can literally tear through opponents and traffic like no one's business. These subtle differences definitely give the game a smattering of simulation feel, but ultimately, the driving in *Midnight Club 3* is more about speed than anything else—it may not reach *Burnout 3*'s level of speed, but it gets pretty darn close.

Naturally, your ride should look pretty damn fly while cruising the streets and alleys of Detroit, Atlanta, or San Diego. To meet that need, Rockstar has gone and included a ridiculous (but comprehensive) amount of customization options available for purchase. Everything is customizable, from fins, rims, and bumpers to hoods and exhausts. In fact, there are so many things to do in the garage that you just might spend more time tweaking your car to a tee than blowing the rims off the competition—it's your call. //

DATA
PUB: **Rockstar** DEV: **Rockstar San Diego** REL: **Early 2005**

STUBBS THE ZOMBIE IN REBEL WITHOUT A PULSE

What do you do after you've founded a world-class development house and had a hand in creating one of the best games ever made? Well, you walk away from it and start all over again, of course. That's exactly what Bungie founder Alex Seropian did in the years following the release of *Halo*—he hit the Reset button. After christening a new studio by the name of Wideload in his native environs of Chicago, Seropian and his freshly assembled crew began work on their next big thing: *Stubbs the Zombie*.

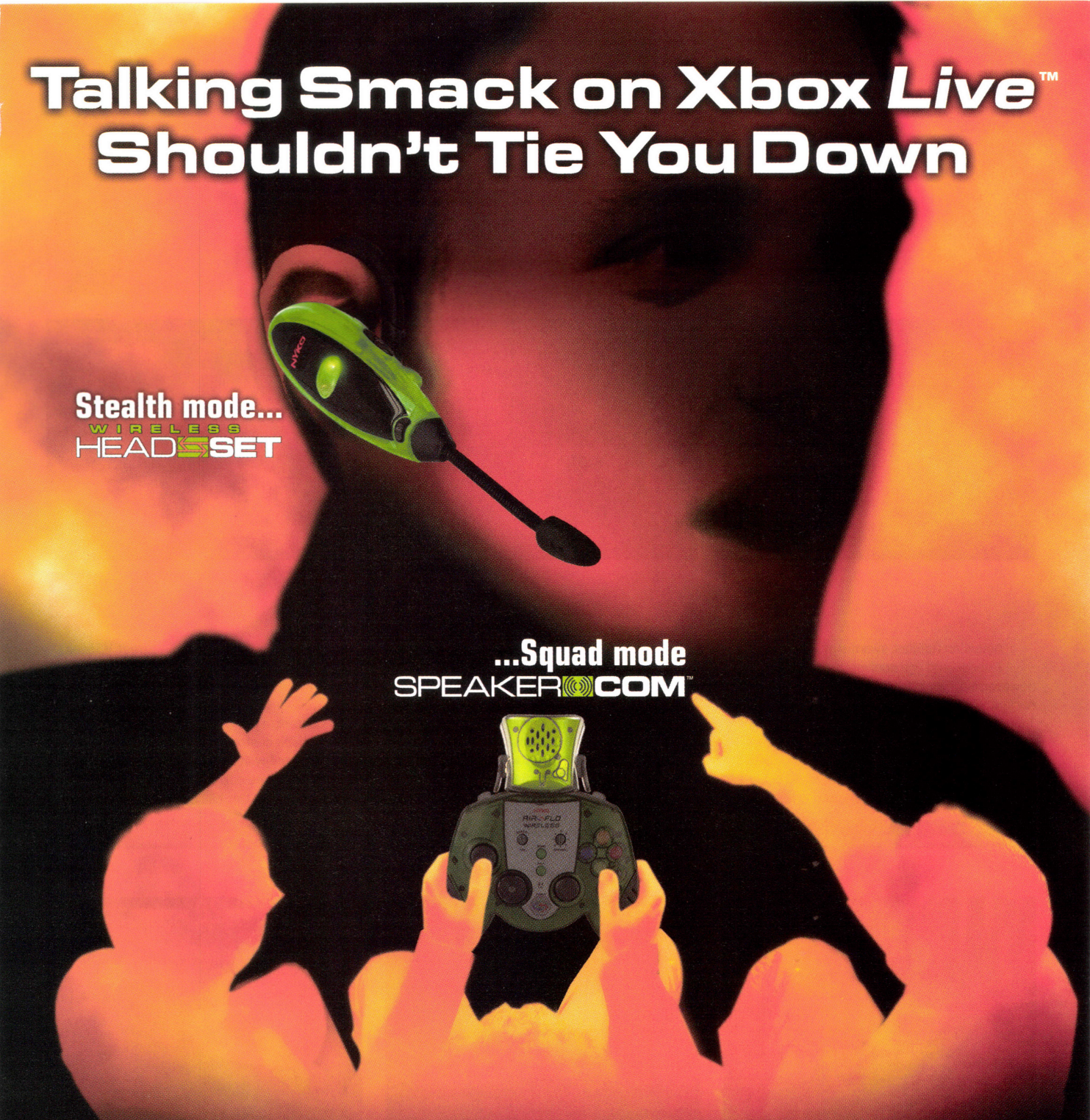
OK, so *Stubbs* lacks the ambiguity and universal appeal of a title like *Halo*—and the fact that it's, well, about a zombie immediately shoves the game into the realm of camp. Which is precisely how Seropian hopes it will be received. Powered by a heavily modified *Halo* engine, *Stubbs* puts you in the tattered trousers of Edward Stubbs, a former traveling salesman turned zombie who terrorizes a kitschy utopian metropolis. Played entirely from a third-person, behind-the-shoulder perspective, *Stubbs*' gameplay hooks are innovative and work well in the context of the game.

As a zombie, Stubbs' weapon of choice is his own body. Detaching his hand allows the limb to speed along walls and through small spaces like an unholy spider. His hand also has the useful ability to possess gun-toting humans who fall under your control. Stubbs can also use chunks of his innards as grenades against his foes. Most importantly, Stubbs can create an army of undead allies by feasting on the brains of the living.

Although the game is genuinely funny, what's most appealing about *Stubbs*, even at this early stage, isn't the humor, but rather its combination of combat chaos and intelligent A.I., giving every skirmish an unpredictable dynamic reminiscent of *Halo*. If Seropian and Wideload can pull off their unique vision, lightning may indeed strike twice. //

DATA
PUB: **Aspyr** DEV: **Wideload Studios** REL: **Summer 2005**

Talking Smack on Xbox *Live*™ Shouldn't Tie You Down



Communication is everything on Xbox Live. Don't lose the advantage by getting tangled up in a messy battle with cords. Use the Wireless Headset instead to verbally square off with opponents in cordless freedom. If friends stop by your home base, plug the SpeakerCom into the Xbox controller, and let them in on the trash talking.

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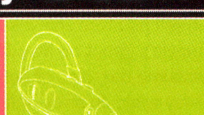

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Beyond Butcher Bay...

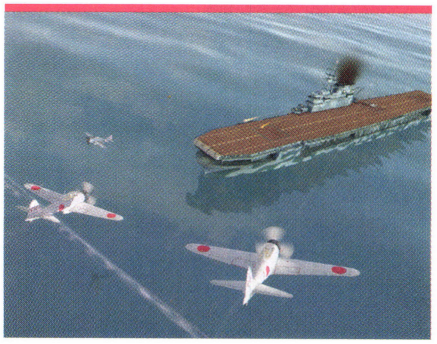
Hot off the success of its sleeper, sneaker smash hit *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*, Swedish developer Starbreeze has been tapped by a recently reinvigorated Majesco to develop content for the next generation of consoles. Specific details—including the number and genres of said forthcoming titles—were unavailable at press time.

Mortal Mania

Midway has announced plans to release a new *Mortal Kombat* title every year, starting with *Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks* in the fall of 2005. This action-adventure hybrid will sport plenty of fisticuffs and fan service—in the form of familiar faces, living trees, scads of acid, and lots of spikes—as well as puzzle solving and (shudder) an "epic story line."

A Second Hit of X

With sales of its action-RPG *X-Men Legends* still going strong, Activision has announced that Raven Software has signed on to develop a sequel. Currently, no additional information—including the title or a planned release date—is available.



BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

American flotillas, swarms of Japanese Zeroes—and you control them all. This, however, isn't your typical RTS game. Hop into the cockpit while switching between crafts on the fly. Train your battleship's guns on the enemy, launch a sub's torpedoes, and then dive-bomb aircraft carriers. The A.I. picks up the slack of any units when you're not at the helm. In multiplayer, up 15 other people can join to relive World War II. //

DATA
PUB: **THQ** DEV: **Mithis** REL: **Q1 2005**

IRON PHOENIX

In *Iron Phoenix*, the rules of polite society don't apply, so it's jolly good form to grab some yutz and shove him into spikes or hurl him into the void. And rest assured, there will be many wanting to do the same to you; *Phoenix* supports 16 players online with a variety of environments and game types. Nine magic weapons give brawlers access to varying fighting styles; the mayhem commences before April's showers. //

DATA
PUB: **Sammy Studios** DEV: **InterServ** REL: **Q1 2005**

NBA STREET V3

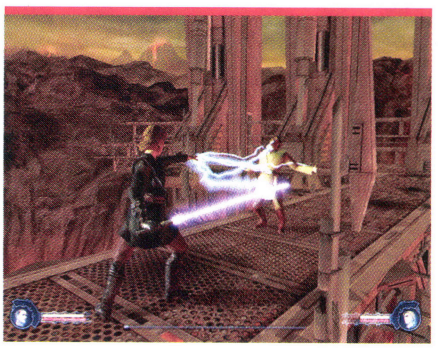
While the buzz around *NBA Street V3* is all about the incredibly detailed player models, equally impressive are the seminal street courts re-created for the game. An MTV-esque Slam Dunk Contest, a jaw-dropping create-a-court feature (think customizable everything), and 175 scheduled real-world players—willing and able to pull off even more outrageous stunts at your command—make this ball one hot potato. //

DATA
PUB: **EA Sports** DEV: **EA Canada** REL: **2005**

OUTLAW TENNIS

Continuing the tradition of "sassying up" such staid, preppy sports as golf and volleyball, the *Outlaw* series sets its tawdry sights on tennis. Online play, an innovative momentum meter that rewards players on hot streaks with extra turbo abilities, multiple shot and serve types, fighting, customizable stats, and selectable outfits should make *Outlaw Tennis* more than just an exercise in strippers slapping rednecks. //

DATA
PUB: **Global Star** DEV: **Hypnotix** REL: **Spring 2005**



STAR WARS EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH

Going the blockbuster route paved by *Enter the Matrix* and *Spider-Man 2*, this surefire tie-in will hit store shelves two weeks before the movie's debut on May 19. In the game, players will assume the roles of both Obi-Wan and Anakin as they wield an array of light and dark Force powers, slaughter helpless robots, and eventually come face-to-face with the shocking truth: that Obi-Wan Kenobi...is Anakin Skywalker's father! //

DATA
PUB: **LucasArts** DEV: **The Collective** REL: **May 5, 2005**

STREET FIGHTER ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION

In *Hyper Street Fighter II*—one half of the *Anniversary Collection*—you can pick any character from any version of any *Street Fighter* game...well, just so long as they're the versions from *Street Fighter II* through *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*. The versions, in other words, with the least differences. Weak punch? Pretty much. Still, the option of playing *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*—the best of the bunch—online is quite a draw... //

DATA
PUB: **Capcom** DEV: **Capcom** REL: **Q1 2005**

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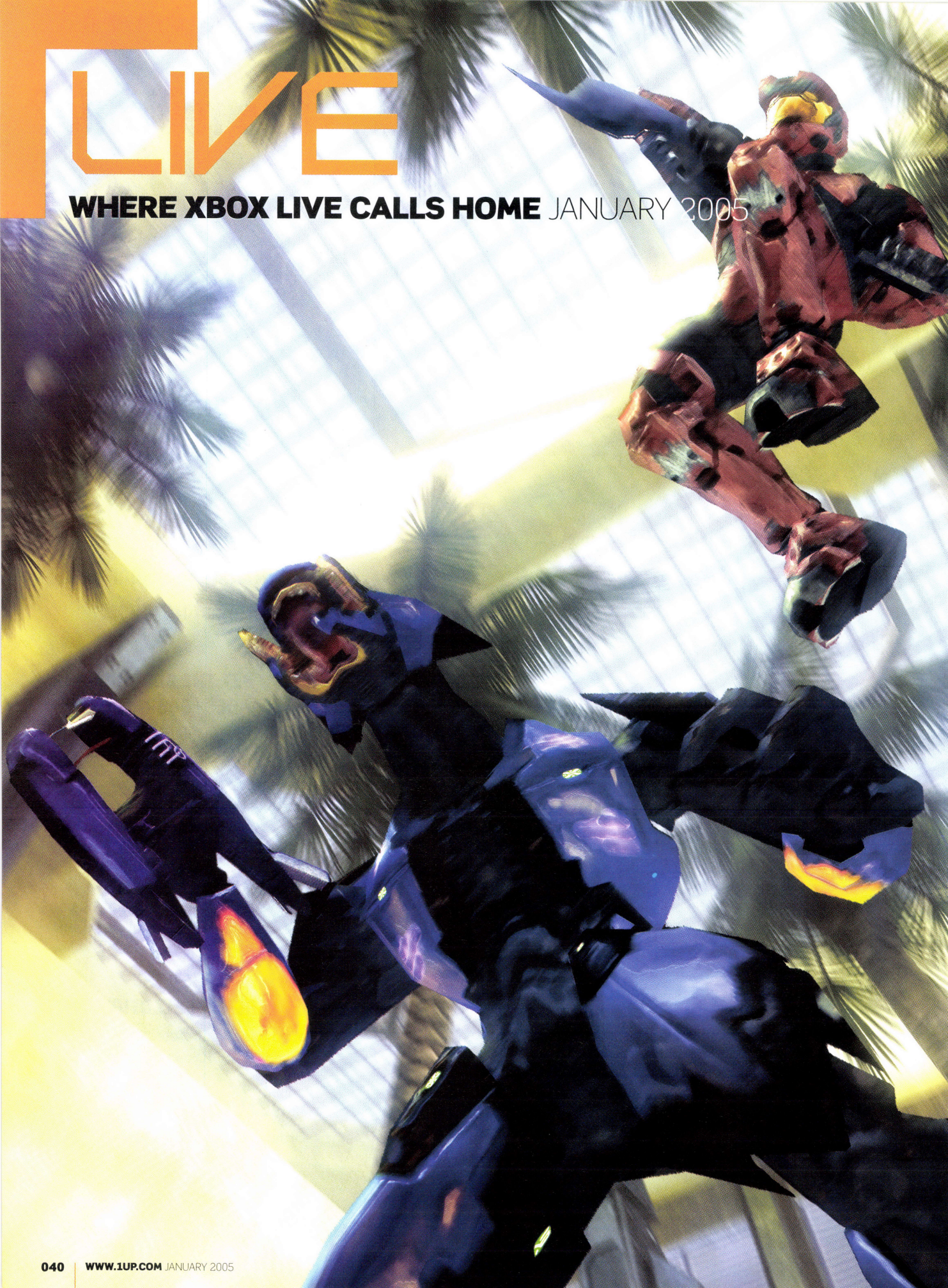
WHERE XBOX LIVE CALLS HOME JANUARY 2005



GETTING IN THE KILL ZONE

Essential multiplayer tips for a better, happier *Halo 2* on Xbox Live

Halo 2 is here and your Xbox Live multiplayer experience will never be the same. Neither will your fragile ego as you get owned in the Rumble Pit time and time again. *Xbox Nation* has compiled a handful of general tips to help you stay frosty online.

RADAR: Actually, it's not a radar—it's a motion sensor. That's an important distinction because it means if you stop moving (or move slowly, like when you're crouched), you won't show up on it. Use that to your advantage, especially in team modes like capture the flag.

E-Z CHAT: If you want to speak to your entire team (or to everyone in free-for-all games), you don't need to hold down the White button (or Up on the D-pad) the entire time. You can let go anytime after you start talking and the game will act like it's pressed down until you stop speaking.

LONG WAITS: If you're spending an obnoxiously long amount of time waiting in the matchmaking screen for ranked games, you're not alone. Thankfully, Bungie has addressed the problem with an auto update. Go download it now!

MAP WON'T LOAD/DIRTY-DISC ERRORS: Sometimes the culprit here actually is a dirty or scratched game disc. If that's the case, take it out and clean it. But according to Bungie, sometimes these errors are caused by faulty Xbox DVD drives; if that's the case, you may need to get yours replaced. The only work-around now is to reboot, but Bungie is working on a solution where you will be able to load other maps after you get the errors without having to restart.

LEVELS: Everyone knows that the little number next to your name is your *Halo 2* ranking, but do you know how it's determined? You can find the exact math in the official strategy guide or on Bungie.net (and see precisely how close you are to your next level), but all that's really important to remember is that you gain experience points by beating higher-level players and lose them by finishing below lower-level enemies. Yes, you can get demoted if you suck too hardcore.

BUNGIE.NET: Speaking of this website, how come its logo appears behind some players' names on Xbox Live? Simple, they went and registered on the site, linked their gamertag to their Bungie.net login, and clicked on the option "Show Bungie.net User Status in *Halo 2*." OK, maybe not so simple.

BOOST YOUR LOOK SENSITIVITY: As high as you can stand it. Players who can turn faster are at an advantage looking for targets as they run around and in close-quarters circle-strafing fights.

EXPLODING CRATES: In a first-person shooter? Whodathunkit! But seriously, don't ignore these. Almost every level has some, and you can often just push or shoot them for an instant kill.

LAST GASP: If you're definitely about to die (like if you're being shot from behind and will be dead by the time you turn around), let loose a grenade before you topple over. It might just avenge your death from beyond the grave.

"U KILLED [SOMEONE]": If you see messages like this (instead of "You killed [someone]"), the sides of your viewing area are being cut off. This happens anytime you run the game in 480p progressive-scan mode. Fortunately, Bungie has released a fix to this bug (in the same update package as the matchmaking patch) that will automatically download when you sign onto Live.

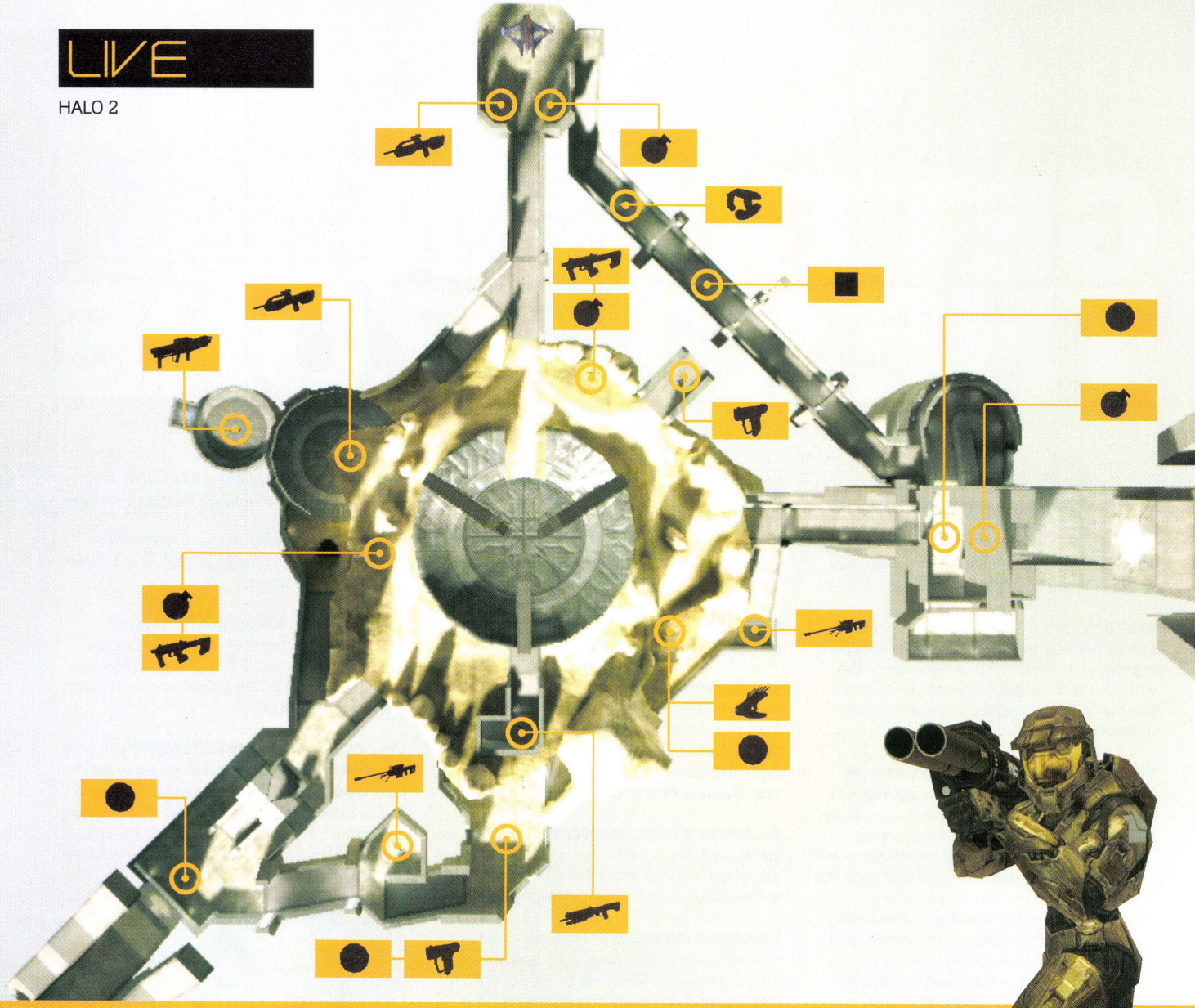
FIGHT FOR YOURSELF: If you're carrying the oddball or flag, don't forget you still have a (rather powerful) melee attack.

MIGHT AS WELL JUMP: If you find yourself staring down the barrel of the rocket launcher, keep leaping into the air (to avoid splash damage when the rocket hits the ground) and try to get in close for a suicide kill.

UNLOCK THE SECRET MULTIPLAYER MAP: Once you've finished the game, restart the last level in co-op mode with your player and a newly created profile. Make sure the new guy rides in a Banshee and does a barrel roll (press any direction and A), then finish the game again. Now go into multiplayer and the Foundation map will be open! //

Not jumping will get you dead like poor Blondebeard.

The hidden level Foundation.



SNIPER'S PARADISE... ASCENSION

Map-specific tips and strategies for *Halo 2* multiplayer

With a circular center platform and a sniper point on each side of the map, Ascension is an unusual mixture of open space and cramped, smaller corridors. Sniper players will love the level, and a Banshee is invaluable for air supremacy, allowing you to pick off your opponents from the safety of the skies.

GENERAL TIPS

Ascension takes a bit of getting used to since there are some parts suitable for up-close attacks and some for mid- to long-range shots. Hold on to a balanced weapon combo like the shotgun and a sniper or a battle rifle (press Y to quickly switch between the two). If you prefer to dual-wield, you can go with something like the submachine gun and Magnum combo since the SMG is decent up close and the magnum is effective both point-blank and in midrange firefights.

SLAYER TIPS

Adjust the look sensitivity in the Controls menu within your player profile. The best players will use higher settings so they can look and turn around quickly. Try out the higher numbers while you play through the campaign, so by the time you get to multiplayer, you'll be accustomed to them. More importantly, know the map inside and out. When you spawn, always run toward your weapon of choice, and when you can, cherry-pick your kills from those already engaged in gun battle with somebody else.

KING-OF-THE-HILL TIPS

Pay attention at the beginning of the game to how many competitors are in the match. If it's a small group of four or five, then feel free to be more aggressive in going after the hill, because there's a good chance the zone won't be heavily defended. If you're playing with a larger group, be slightly more cautious before you get into the designated area or you'll be taken out almost

ASCENSION

instantly. Don't get discouraged if you only maintain control of the hill for a few seconds at a time in a big match—that's the nature of the game.

ODDBALL TIPS

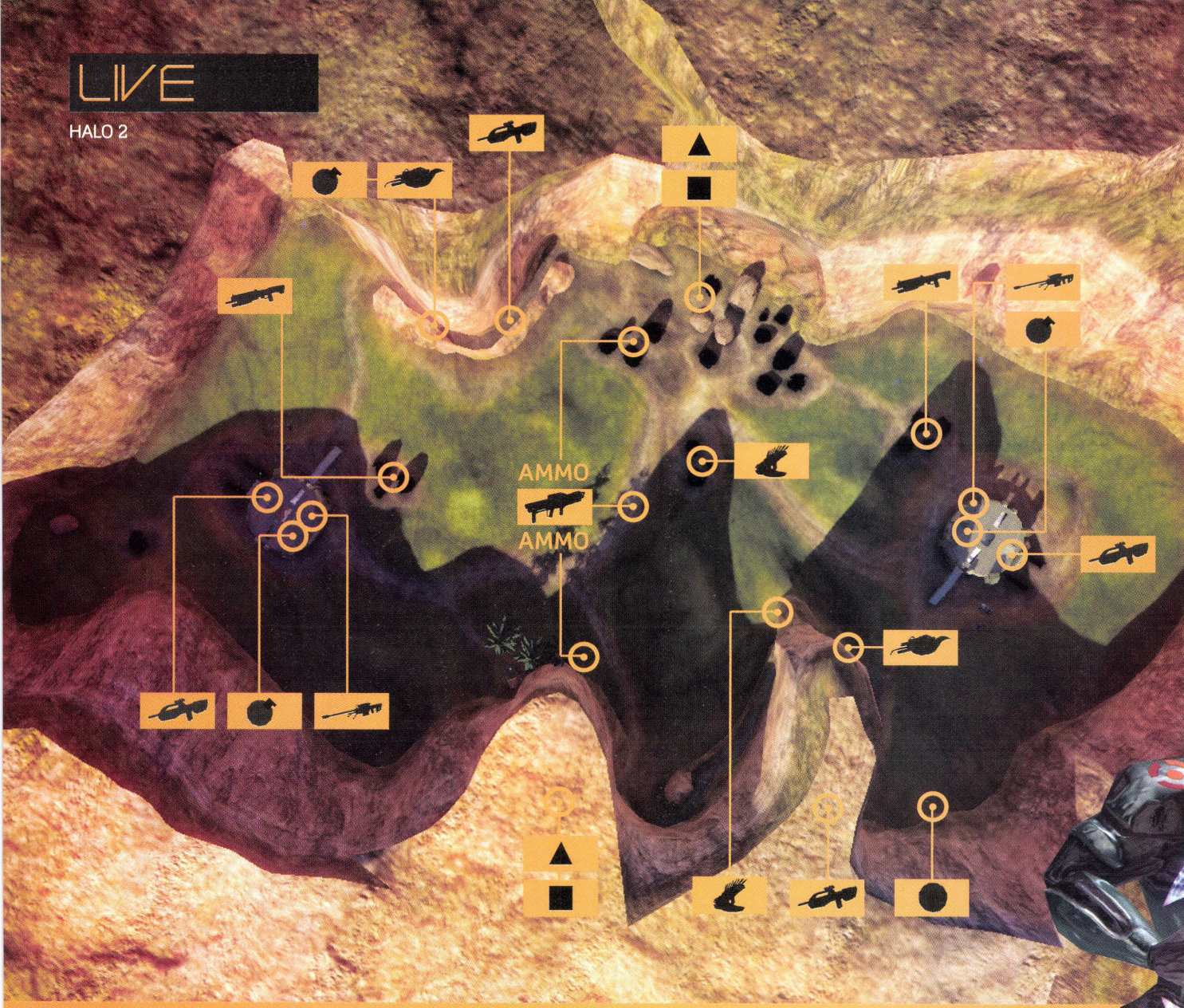
Run! You can't just sit and hide with the ball or your opponents will track you down within seconds. Try to utilize less-traveled paths like the narrow walkway connecting the higher sniper tower and the Banshee's parking place. With a lot of luck and a good strategy, you should be able to put together some long runs with the ball, assuming there aren't too many opponents in the game. If you're about to die, jump off the nearest ledge to your death so your enemies won't be able to pick up the ball right away. Instead, the oddball will appear back where it started at the beginning of the game.

SECRET ROCKET PLATFORM

Just below the circular platform off to the left of the center of the map, you can jump down to a hidden platform to grab a rocket launcher. A wind boost will throw you back into the middle of the map. If you grab the rocket launcher and head back using the wind boost, you'll have a great aerial view of the enemies usually clustered around the center of the map. That's when you rain down death from above. You can also use this boost to propel yourself onto the metal beams in the center of the map, which is a good spot to hide from the enemies running around below, but watch out for snipers, because the two main sniper spots will be aiming right at you.

SNIPING

Ascension is one of the sniper-friendliest maps in the game thanks to multiple elevated platforms that have views of most of the surface space in the level. If you're sniping, be sure to watch your back, because both of the key sniping points in the level leave you vulnerable to attacks from behind. With sniper rifle in hand, try flying a Banshee up to the roof above the eastern sniper tower. Once there, you can snipe without having to worry about getting assassinated from behind. Watch out for enemy marksmen trying to take you out from the opposite tower. //



BLOOD GULCH RETURNS... COAGULATION

Map-specific tips and strategies for *Halo 2* multiplayer

The much-talked-about Coagulation map is *Halo 2*'s upgraded version of *Halo*'s popular Blood Gulch arena. It's basically a lengthy canyon with a base at each end and a few hills in the middle to vary the terrain and prevent snipers from dominating. There is also a path first-time players may miss along the side of the map, where you can go to find power-ups and sneak past opponents. Be prepared to spend lots of time delivering bombs and flags on Coagulation.

GENERAL TIPS

In addition to various boulders added to the map, the terrain in the middle has more hills, making things difficult for snipers who like picking off the opposing team as they wander out towards the middle to grab the rocket launcher. This makes it easier to advance on foot and harder to find a straight path to drive vehicles across, so if you want to progress slowly on foot with a battle rifle as your primary weapon, you should be OK. The rocket launcher sits in a vulnerable position in the middle of the field almost equal distances from the two bases. Due to its new homing capabilities, ownership of the rocket launcher is important if you want to take out enemy vehicles. If the opposing team grabs your flag and takes off in a vehicle, try your best to teleport out to midfield and grab the rocket launcher to take them out.

CAPTURE-THE-FLAG TIPS

Flying back to your base with the enemy's flag in a Banshee could be risky, because even though you have some maneuverability, you're in a more fragile vehicle than you might think. Have your teammates back you up with Warthog or

COAGULATION

ROOFTOP MADNESS: Before entering an enemy base, it's a good idea to approach from the roof and throw grenades into the opening to weaken opposition before you snatch the flag.

THE WARTHOG IS KEY: In CTF matches, it's important to keep your Warthog intact for a getaway vehicle.

AIR SUPPORT: Each team should always have one Banshee patrolling the air, picking off stragglers and warning teammates about incoming enemies.

Ghost support when you come running out of the enemy base.

THE BATTLE RIFLE

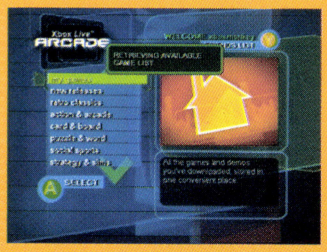
One of the more effective weapons in Blood Gulch is the pistol, thanks in particular to its zooming abilities. On Coagulation in *Halo 2*, look to the battle rifle, which has similar zoom capabilities and works great in midrange firefights when you need to drop a couple of fools on the quick. If you're an accurate shot, three bursts to the head should take down an enemy.

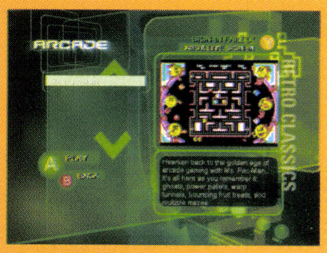
TELEPORTER BLOCKING

Much as in Blood Gulch, players can still drop vehicles onto teleporter exits to block them, so the opposing team members can't teleport from their base to midfield. In a capture-the-flag game, this will give you a much better chance of escaping with the flag because the other team won't have as many options for tracking you down as you escape.

VEHICLES

Vehicles are often used on Coagulation for capture-the-flag getaways and quick movement from one end to the other, but thanks to *Halo 2*'s destructible vehicles feature, they are less dominant than they used to be. You can try taking them out on foot, boarding them and removing the driver, or locking on with the rocket launcher to prevent quick getaways. //





XBOX LIVE ARCADE

A pocket full of quarters makes a comeback

Microsoft has yet again decided to up the value of the Xbox Live service—this time by providing a constantly growing library of beer-and-pretzels games for casual users through Xbox Live Arcade. Available in local stores, enclosed in Live Starter Kits, and likely bundled with everything else (three-month Live trial code, anyone?), the Xbox Live Arcade DVD will power up your Live experience by installing and granting you access to the Xbox Live Arcade interface. Similar to the slick Xbox native interface, its series of nested menus will offer a variety of game categories from which you can simply pick games to try—and buy. When it launches, XLA will present a selection of genres, including retro arcade, card, and board games; puzzle and trivia games; action and arcade games; and social sports. What sort of games will you find in these categories? *Xbox Nation* gives you the scoop.

RETRO ARCADE GAMES

This genre will be composed of classic arcade titles. *Dig Dug*, *Pole Position*, *Galaga*, *Joust*, *Defender*, *Robotron*, and *Gauntlet* will be staring you in the face, and these are no half-assed ports, they're straight from the original publishers, just like you remember from the arcade. *Cough* online MAME *cough.*

CARD & BOARD GAMES

Poker, hearts, spades, backgammon, and chess, to start. You thought it was fun yelling "PWNED!" at opponents in *Rainbow Six*? Try singing some Kenny Rogers over a royal flush and watch that punk disconnect. Keep in mind all the usual statistics you've come to expect from the Live service will be in place here, so being the No. 1 poker player or chess master in the country is really going to mean something—to everyone for a change.

PUZZLE & TRIVIA GAMES

Web-tested and player-approved titles like *Bejeweled*, *Zuma*, *Hexic*, *Fuzzee Fever*, and *Mah Jong Tiles* will certainly keep your pulsating-cerebrum friends from scoffing at your precious Xbox, since they clearly don't understand the love that *Dead or Alive Ultimate* has to give.

ACTION & ARCADE GAMES

A genre that has largely been left in the past, side-scrolling shoot-em-ups and old-school 2D platformers make a comeback here. *Alien Sky*, *Hamsterball*, *Feeding Frenzy*, and *Marble Blast* remind us of why games like *Xevious* and *Marble Madness* sucked more quarters out of our pockets than Paris Hilt—never mind.

SOCIAL SPORTS

The hardcore of the beer-and-pretzels world is composed of these social games. Bowling, billiards, and golf have brought together more friends and been responsible for more alcohol consumption than marriage receptions have—and now they'll be one button away.

At launch, XLA will charge anywhere from $9.99 for basic games to $19.99 for more fully featured titles, and early adopters of XLA will get a free copy of every girlfriend's favorite, *Ms. Pac-Man*. That may seem like a lot to shell out, but considering the burning desire many of us have to hear "Elf needs food—badly," it's probably going to look a lot more reasonable after a few hours of playing levels one to three. It's also important to note that Microsoft is looking to hit 40 titles by Christmas, and it's a safe bet that number is only going to grow quickly over time. That's going to add up fast, and for a product that's free to begin with and contains a free trial for every title, who's complaining?

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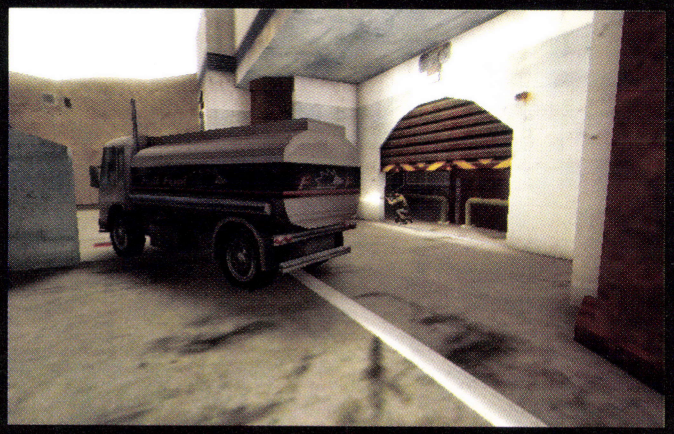
ON THE DL

The newest Xbox Live downloadable content, served fresh

RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW

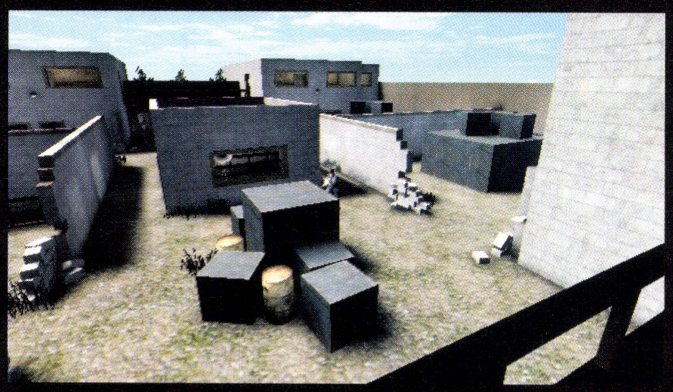


OFFICE COMPLEX

Finally, we're given a massive office building containing three stories of cubicle after ever-lovin' cubicle. OK, there are conference rooms and executive offices as well, along with the beloved snack machines and their shattering glass fronts. This is an intimate close-quarters map all the way, so don't bother with sniper rifles—it's going to be shotty time, and we'll actually get to use those breaching charges and claymores!

PETROLEUM

Petroleum is an oil transport depot in Anha, Saudi Arabia. This map has a small train depot complete with trains and narrow tunnels leading to a base loaded with twisting passages and narrow corridors. Going from dark tunnels to the brightly lit outdoor areas will give IR switches a workout, and the perfect variety of nooks, halls, and occasional open areas will keep teams tight.



KILLHOUSE

Familiar to any *Rainbow Six* player worth his salt, the good old SWAT training facility—Killhouse—has been one of the bread-and-butter levels for tactical combat games since forever. Spattered with set indoor locations for quick close-quarters combat, the level spreads out to allow snipers and machine gunners plenty of room to take advantage of suckers who don't keep their heads down. Unlike its predecessors, this version of Killhouse offers climbable boxes, which one can only imagine would be useful for those who wish to make themselves as visible a target as possible. Hey, more kills for us!

WINTER LODGE

A huge, miserable mansion surrounded by a high wall, this map is paranoia done Overlook Hotel style. The mansion has two stories with multiple routes from above and below to ensure there is nowhere for a camper to safely hide. Just about every point on the map is designed to be accessible from two points, so you'll be moving a lot just to stay out of harm's way. This map is perfect for both team-based modes and extremely tense deathmatches.

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DOWNLOAD MANIA

GOING LIVE LIST

Everything you wanted to know about Xbox Live (but were afraid to ask)

CURRENT XBOX LIVE GAMES

Title	Publisher	Live Multiplayer	Splitscreen Live	Downloadable Content/Updates
All-Star Baseball 2004	Acclaim			
All-Star Baseball 2005	Acclaim	X		Roster/stadium planned
Amped 2	Microsoft	X		Three slopes: Sky, Pioneer, and Slopestyle 2003
Armada 2: Star Command	Metro 3D			
Armed and Dangerous	LucasArts			Summer Home mission
Brute Force	Microsoft			Three deathmatch maps: Prisoner's Lament, Cerulean, and Lockjaw
Burnout 2: Point of Impact DC	Acclaim			
Burnout 3: Takedown	EA	X		
Cabela's Dangerous Hunts	Activision			
Capcom vs. SNK 2: E.O.	Capcom	X		
Conflict: Desert Storm II—Back to Baghdad	Pivotal			Four uniforms: CT, Brit DPM, Woodland, and Iraqi Republican
Chronicles of Riddick: EFBB	VU Games			
Dance Dance Revolution Ultramix	Konami			Three song packs
Dead Man's Hand	Atari	X		
Dead or Alive: Ultimate	Tecmo			
Driv3r	Atari			Share replays online
ESPN College Hoops	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN Major League Baseball	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NBA Basketball 2005	Sega	X		Roster updates
ESPN NFL Football	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NHL Hockey	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NHL 2005	Sega	X		Roster updates
FIFA Soccer 2005	EA	X		
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	X		
Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee	Atari			
Guilty Gear X2 #Reload	Majesco	X		
High Heat Major League Baseball 2004	3DO			Roster updates as of May '03
Hunter: The Reckoning—Redeemer	Vivendi			Two sets of costumes
Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders	Microsoft	X		
Links 2004	Microsoft	X		Three courses: Ocean Mill DC, The Gallery North, and Kapalua Plantation
MLB Inside Pitch 2003	Microsoft	X		Roster updates
Madden NFL 2005	EA	X		
Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds	Atari	X		Ten new spells, one new arena
Men of Valor	VU Games	X		
Metal Slug 3	SNK NeoGeo			
Midnight Club II	Rockstar	X		
Midway Arcade Treasures	Midway	X		
Mortal Kombat: Deception	Midway	X		
MotoGP	THQ	X	X	
MotoGP 2	THQ	X	X	
MTX: Mototrax	Activision	X		New tracks available
MX Superfly	THQ			Two new tracks (Backyard Bash and Mall Jump) and nine new riders
NASCAR 2005: Chase for the Cup	EA	X		
NBA Inside Drive 2004	Microsoft	X		Spring roster update now available
NBA Live 2005	EA	X		
NCAA College Basketball 2K3	Sega	X		
NCAA Football 2005	EA	X		
NFL Fever 2004	Microsoft	X		Roster updates

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Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

LIVE

DOWNLOAD MANIA

So you've got a shiny new Xbox Live account and a fat stack of games gathered into small (but organized!) piles on your floor, but you don't know where to start. Well, here's our guide to everything Xbox Live: the games you can play online now, the games that have downloadable content, and the games with online capabilities that you should be looking out for in the near future. We've also got a list of the most popular games out there as of right now, so you know where to go for the stiffest competition around.

CURRENT XBOX LIVE GAMES

Title	Publisher	Live Multiplayer	Splitscreen Live	Downloadable Content/Updates
NHL Rivals 2004	Microsoft	X		Roster updates as of March 2004
Ninja Gaiden	Team Ninja			Two content packs: new weapons, enemies, A.I., camera views, and faster gameplay
Outlaw Volleyball	Simon & Schuster	X		
Phantasy Star Online Episode I & II	Sega	X		New quests released periodically
Power Drome	Mud Duck Prod.	X		
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	Ubisoft			
RalliSport Challenge 2	Microsoft	X		
Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War	Activision	X		Three missions: Barn, Safe, and Chateau
Run Like Hell	Interplay			New levels and monsters
SEGA GT Online: WOW/Sega	Sega	X		Five new tracks and monthly "key" competitions available
ESPN NBA 2K3	Sega	X		
ESPN NFL 2K3	Sega	X		
ESPN NHL 2K3	Sega	X		
Soldier of Fortune 2: Double Helix	Activision	X		Five maps: Kowloon Market, Oil Rig, Kremenchug, Ruins, and Cheapshot Forest
Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy	LucasArts	X		
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic	LucasArts			Yavin station location available for download
Star Wars: The Clone Wars	LucasArts	X		Two maps: Rhen Var and Kashyyyk
Steel Battalion: Line of Contact	Capcom	X		
Street Racing Syndicate	Namco	X		
SWAT: Global Strike Team	VU Games			Two maps: Militant Hideout and One-stop shopping
Tenchu: Return from Darkness	Activision	X		
Tetris Worlds Online	THQ	X	X	
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005	EA	X		
ToeJam & Earl 3: Mission to Earth	Sega			Three characters: Suteki, Earl Bot, Nerdy Toejam; two levels: Funkadelic, Hades
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon	Ubisoft	X		
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3	Ubisoft	X		Five maps: Meat Factory, Scharins, Close Quarters, Parkade, and Train Yards
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell	Ubisoft	X		Three missions: Kola Cell, Vselka Infiltration, and Vselka
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell : Pandora Tomorrow	Ubisoft	X		Two maps: Federal Bank and River Mall
Top Spin	Microsoft	X		
Tron 2.0: Killer App	Buena Vista	X		
Unreal Championship	Atari	X	X	Four deathmatch levels
Unreal II: The Awakening	Atari	X		
Vietcong: Purple Haze	Take-Two	X		
World Championship Pool 2004	Jaleco	X		
Worms 3D	Team17	X		
XIII	Ubisoft	X		

OUR PICKS: THE TOP XBOX LIVE GAMES

Project Gotham Racing 2
Bizarre Creations | Microsoft
Paris premium pack contains seven tracks and eight cars (TVR Cerbera Speed 12, BMW M3 CSL, BMW 645Ci, Chevrolet Corvette C6, Ferrari 250 TR, Ferrari 288 GTO, Ferrari 365 GTS 4, Porsche 356 A Carrera).
Long Beach pack has eight more tracks and cars (Subaru 22B STi, Ariel Atom 2, Ferrari 612 Scaglietti, Porsche 911 GT2 Clubsport, Subaru Impreza 22B STi, Radical SR3, Dodge Ram SRT-10, and Volkswagen Nardo).

MechAssault
Day 1 Studios | Microsoft
Four mechs (Corvus, Raven, Loki, Hellbringer), 10 maps (Hell's Kitchen, Midtown, Desert Storm, Stone Cold, Demolition Town, Rock Solid, Jotunheim, Secret Outpost, Magma Fields, City Under Siege) and five new game modes (Giant Killers, Scout Match, Skirmish, Check it, and Take it)

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder
Red Storm | Ubisoft
14 maps (Refinery, Beach, Ghost Town, Train Depot, Aurora, Riverbed, Roadblock, Tank, Ruins, Wilderness, Hunting Lodge, Island, Prison, and Island Village) and three game modes (Firefight, Defend, and Recon)

Counter-Strike
Valve | Microsoft
Two maps: Office and Inferno

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3
Ubisoft Montreal | Ubisoft
Five maps: Meat Factory, Scharins, Close Quarters, Parkade, and Train Yards

Star Wars Battlefront
Pandemic Studios | LucasArts

ESPN NFL 2K5
ESPN | Sega
Roster updates

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GOTHAM PROJECT

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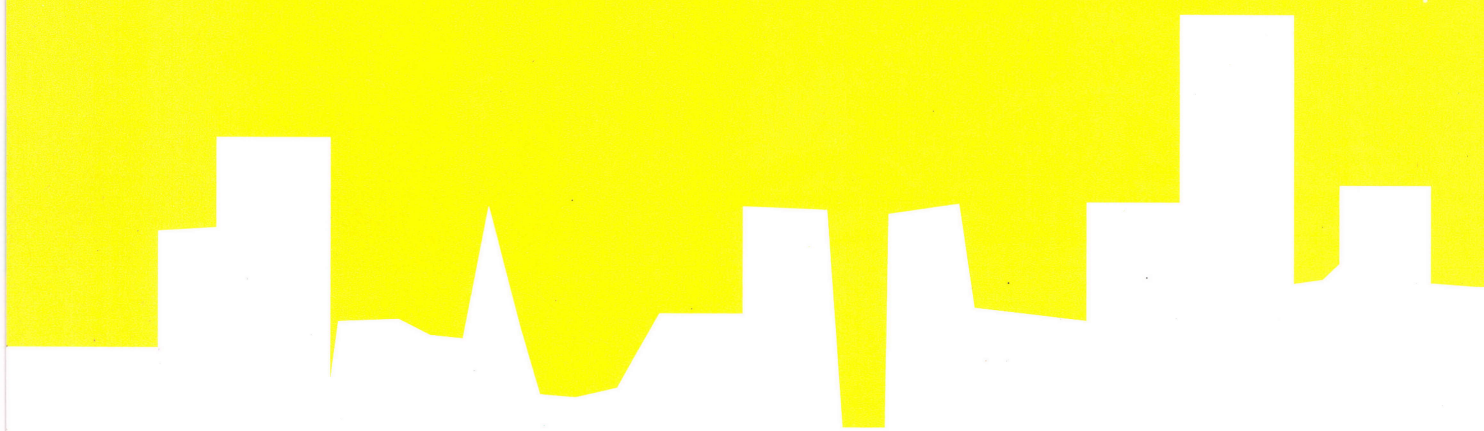
WORDS: GREG ORLANDO PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL SEXTON



The walls of Demorama, a creatively named meeting room nestled deep within the bowels of Electronic Arts' secret California headquarters, are adorned with Batman posters. On one wall, the clown-faced Joker, his nose as pointy as his outstretched tongue, leads a procession of villainy celebrating over the prone figure of their mortal enemy, the Bat. To the right: Batman triumphant with his allies, perched atop a Gotham City rooftop, chests collectively outthrust, as superheroes are wont to do. And then: a solitary Caped Crusader staring intently off into space.

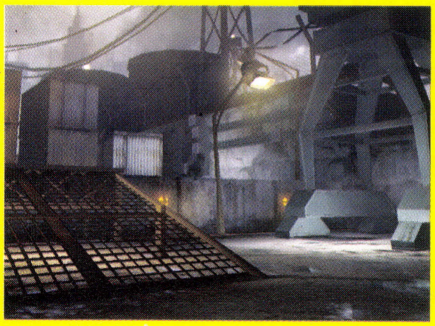
The last poster shows the Bat symbol, all angled and muted in black and brown. This is Batman's icon as it appears for his rebirth, what Warner Bros. and Electronic Arts are both celebrating as his definitive origin story.

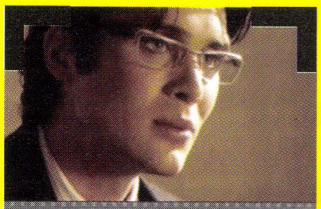
This is a new start for the Dark Knight detective. It's a rejection of Joel Schumacher's gaudy, neon-filled homo-erotic dance party, *Batman & Robin*, and a return of the venerated comic-book hero to his darker, grittier Bob Kane- and Frank Miller-inspired roots. This is not the Batman who, when he hits people with right hooks, the word "Ka-pow!" appears in oversized letters on the screen. This is a Batman who knows how to use the shadows. This is not a Batman at all interested in dancing the Bat-tusi or adopting small young boys and going on adventures with them.

This is a Batman who will hurt you.

And fear is his greatest weapon.

This new Batman will be able to perform every single move his stealth-action counterpart Sam Fisher from *Splinter Cell* can.





AS THE CROW FLIES...

Not-so-mild-mannered professor of psychology Jonathan Crane was dismissed from his teaching position and did what all right-thinking people would do in that situation: He dressed himself up as a scarecrow and used a fear-inducing nerve agent to scare several of his former coworkers to death. Take that, academia!

Scarecrow will serve as Batman's foil in Batman Begins. Few details about the Scarecrow have been revealed, save for that his costume will be suitably scary and he'll be played by actor Cillian Murphy from *28 Days Later*.

Inside the confines of Demorama, *Batman Begins*' producer Reid Schneider holds court flanked by Anthony Caiazzo and Deni Skeens, the game's product manager and assistant producer, respectively. Today was the day Schneider and his cohorts had to present an early version of their game to the suits at EA. Perhaps in a subconscious homage, Schneider is dressed wholly in black and gray, Batman's colors. He will no doubt bristle at the notion, but Schneider not only has dressed in the style of the hero, he also possesses the same facial structure as Christian Bale, the man who plays the dual role of millionaire Bruce Wayne and his superheroic alter ego in *Batman Begins*. This seems absolutely fitting, considering the man's familiarity with DC Comics' venerable hero—a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, Schneider served as producer for Ubisoft's *Batman: Vengeance*.

BATMAN, BEGIN AGAIN

"In the past," Schneider says, "the problem that people had is the Batman character has been skewed very young in terms of licensing, whether it was the animated series or the TV stuff. We need to give Batman his rightful place in videogames."

Batman's checkered videogame past looms like an albatross. In recent memory, companies such as Acclaim, Kemco, and Ubisoft have rendered the Dark Knight on next-generation consoles such as the PlayStation 2 and Xbox with varying (and this is being kind) degrees of success.

The problem here was developers could make a game starring Batman that was fun and entertaining or they could make a game featuring his dark and mysterious comic-book persona, but could never successfully merge the two. Kemco's *Batman: Dark Tomorrow* captured the creepiness inherent in the character but was the videogame equivalent of a steaming pile of elephant dung. In contrast, Ubisoft's *Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu* managed to entertain, but did so by jettisoning the hero's central core and shoehorning him into a simple 3D beat-em-up.

Interplanetary alignments, tea leaves, and chicken entrails indicate the time is right for a change. *Batman Begins* represents a new day for the Caped Crusader, both in terms of the movie character and his videogame representation. The game represents EA's first stab at the comic-book license and, appropriately, takes its tenor and tone from the Chris Nolan-helmed summer film.

Begins features not only a new director and a new lead in Bale, but also a revised look at the legend of Batman. Nolan has pitched this film as "Batman as he would exist in real life" and proceeded from there. The neophyte Batman in *Begins* comes fresh from watching the death of his parents and training in various exotic parts of the world. What he comes back to, of course, is Gotham City, iconic home of darkness and despair. The circumstances of his return have not been clearly outlined, but the film features classic Batman foils Ra's al Ghul (in Arabic, "the demon's head"), the Scarecrow, and Carmine Falcone.

"This is a harsher, darker hero," Schneider says. "This is about this guy who's troubled, who has real problems. He has a purpose, he's angry, and this is about vengeance."

One look at the redesigned Batsuit for the game (itself modeled on the one from the film) tells the

tale. Gone is the gaudy yellow Bat-target on the center of the hero's chest, replaced by a more sedate black bat symbol. "Much to Anthony's dismay, there are no nipples on the Batsuit," Schneider says jokingly.

With the mandate and will to take Batman back to his roots, everything seems in place. It's a new dawn for an old hero, and Schneider seems genuinely excited to be a part of it; when he describes how *Begins* plays on Xbox, his voice races. More than once he smacks his fist with his palm.

Ka-pow. Enthusiasm is a great start.

'VERB'OSITY

"You. Scream." An electronically rendered Batman holds a goon upside down and what's a down-on-his-luck and inverted thug to do? He wails like a siren. The only thing you have to fear is fear itself? Go to hell, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Fear the Batman.

Central to the game is the notion that fear is Batman's greatest ally. "Everything we build, every time we design a level, we always come back to that central theme that fear is your weapon," Schneider says.

"THIS IS A HARSHER, DARKER HERO. THIS IS ABOUT THIS GUY WHO'S TROUBLED, WHO HAS REAL PROBLEMS. HE HAS A PURPOSE, HE'S ANGRY, AND THIS IS ABOUT VENGEANCE." —REID SCHNEIDER, PRODUCER

Everything Batman does is designed to elicit terror in his victims, to shake their spirits and rattle their nerves.

Thank the gods for the *PowerPoint* display that Schneider and company have prepared for today's presentation to the man and his minions. It breaks down Batman's actions into easy-to-swallow verbs. For those at home keeping score, they are "assess and investigate," "stalk," "attack," "interrogate," and "rescue." All of these represent fundamental aspects of *Begins*' action and define the hero's modus operandi.

Upon entering a new location, Batman will always pause to take in his surroundings. He is, after all, the world's greatest detective, and going into a dangerous spot without first examining the scene would be hugely unbecoming. Clues in the game environment will enable the hero to understand where he is and how he can use his surroundings to great effect. Objects in the world that can be touched, tampered with, broken, or otherwise manipulated appear with yellow circles around them. Enemies themselves will sometimes offer clues as to what makes them tick as well. A smart Batman will take it all in, process it, and then use whatever tools he's given to smite his enemies.

To the point: Scout it out. When Batman creeps up undetected on two ne'er-do-wells in an abandoned alleyway, he's perfectly free to strike. But Batman is, and always has been, a cerebral hero. If he waits, he can find his enemies' weak spots. He can determine the safe approaches to his target. He can stack the deck and build the best odds for himself. Once the situation has been properly gauged and his enemies sized up, he's then able to move to the next phase, stalking.

PATHWAYS INTO DARKNESS

When stalking foes, producer Reid Schneider says, Batman has three ways to make criminals panic-stricken. The first involves manipulation of the environment, such as when Batman tosses Batarangs to knock over flaming barrels or send huge neon signs crashing to the ground. Second, Batman can lurk above foes and drop down to snatch one unseen. With their partner's sudden disappearance, the remaining criminals suffer accordingly. And finally, Batman will be able to exploit specific "theaters of fear" designed to prey on his target's specific phobias...

This is very much a darker, grittier, Batman inspired by comic book artists Frank Miller, David Mazzuchelli, and Bob Kane.

"EVERY AREA IN THE GAME IS DESIGNED AS A THEATER OF FEAR, AND THAT REPRESENTS A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN HOW THE LEVEL DESIGN WORKS FOR THE GAME." —REID SCHNEIDER

Listening to the thugs' conversation reveals that one is supremely proud of his car, which is parked nearby. It's simple enough to target a Batarang to set off the car's alarm, spooking the enemies and causing one of them to run over to see what's amiss, which provides the perfect opportunity for an attack. "When [Batman] stalks, that's when he builds the fear up," Schneider says. "That's when he scares the hell out of people."

A quick flash of a picture inside the picture shows off the reaction of the scared foe. On the top of the screen, a heartbeats-per-minute meter shows an increase from 60 to 108, indicating the level of fear in the victim. The higher the number, the more unnerved the target, and the less effectively he will be able to fight. Frightened enemies can be further prodded into terror by other means: the sudden disappearance of their partners; an unexpected occurrence, such as a nearby flashbang explosion or dropped street sign; or a hit from a Batarang. Increasing Batman's reputation (tracked by an onscreen bar) also allows for greater and easier installments of fright into the weak willed.

Schneider sees this phase as *Begins*' hook, the perfect thing to stand the stealth-action genre, for want of a less well-worn cliché, on its ear. "In *Splinter Cell*, *Metal Gear*, and all these types of games," he says, "you're always the hunted, always on the receiving end. What we're doing in this game is, we're saying, 'Let's change the dynamic around. Let's make you the guy who's hunting and stalking. And when you're ready and when you've got these guys all spun up and scared, that's when you go in for the kill.'"

Attacking comes next, and Batman employs a series of both weak and strong strikes that can be chained together during hand-to-hand combat. The details here have not been cemented, but Schneider says Batman will grow and learn new techniques as the game progresses. With the game in its very early stages of development, he's able to show off only brief glimpses of the fighting, which he describes as akin to that of *Fight Club*'s (the movie, not the game). "[It's] lots of elbows, lots of knees—it's down, it's dirty, and it's hardcore fighting."

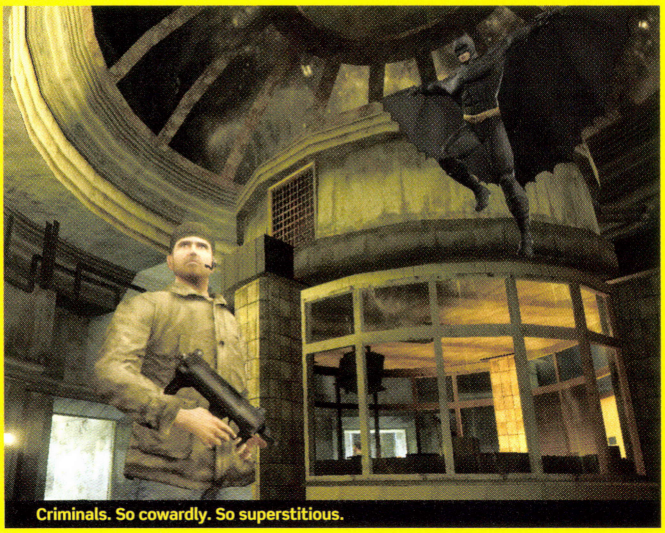
As is the case with the fighting, interrogation has yet to be finalized. It will be interactive, Schneider promises, and very important within gameplay, as this is how Batman obtains his information concerning missions and objectives. "Nobody wants to go around and look for the key," Schneider says. "That's not an interesting way to get information, and that's not realistic. You get information out of people."

When all is said and done, Batman remains a hero. Punishing and brutal as they may be, heroes do not kill. They do, however, rescue the innocent, which in the context of *Begins* remains largely self-explanatory.

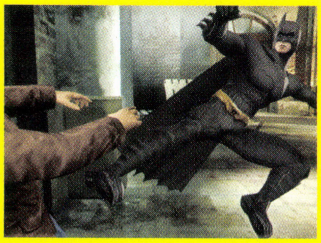
FEAR ITSELF...

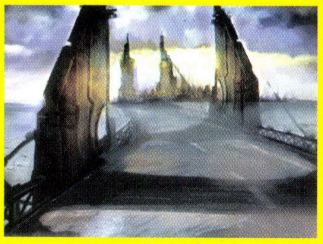
Gotham City serves as Batman's playground, and EA has done an excellent job of capturing it electronically. It's a vertical hell, with huge stone and concrete buildings sprouting from the earth, tossing shadows everywhere. Everything in the city seems designed to play on acrophobia, the fear of heights, and Batman can seize upon this by lifting his enemies in the air and holding them upside down.

"Every area in the game is designed as a theater of fear," Schneider says, "and that represents a fundamental shift in how the level design works for the game." Each part of the game's Gotham, from its



Criminals. So cowardly. So superstitious.





"WE WANT TO KEEP PLAYERS IN CONTROL OF THE ACTION—WHEN THEY'RE IN CONTROL, THAT'S WHEN IT'S MOST EXCITING." —REID SCHNEIDER

DEMON SEED

In an odd twist of fate, when not trying to institute a worldwide genocide, international terrorist Ra's al Ghul ("the demon's head" in Arabic) has attempted to get Batman to marry his lovely and charming daughter Talia. Despite his great enmity with Batman, Ghul considers the Dark Knight an adversary worthy of succeeding him.

Actor Ken Watanabe (The Last Samurai) has been tapped to play Ghul in the upcoming *Batman Begins* film. Together with the Scarecrow, the Gotham crime lord Carmine Falcone, and a mystery foe, Ghul forms the neophyte Batman's opposition.

creaky, decrepit tenements to the claustrophobic and dank Arkham Asylum, has been pored over by the game's makers and the very simple question asked—how is fear going to be built up in an enemy in each area?

With criminals nominally in control of Gotham's famed and feared Arkham, it's easy to see the spring from which fear is to be tapped. As the Dark Knight penetrates the asylum's upper levels, the game quickly cuts to a scene of inmates safely locked away. One bangs his head against a Plexiglas divider; his chum next door twitches and scratches. A third inmate, Schneider's favorite, backs up and then hurls himself at the walls.

A circular control room offers access to the cells' unlocking mechanism. With goons patrolling the asylum's corridors, it seems a safe bet to take the road less traveled, a series of overhanging wires feeding into the control room. Batman, who can perform all the moves of his stealth-action counterpart Sam Fisher from *Splinter Cell*, avoids detection by hooking his legs over the wires and crawling end over end to the control room.

The lone foe inside the control room is distracted, staring at the lunatics in their cells. "If only I had a cattle prod," he says aloud. It's child's play for Batman to drop down behind him without being heard and then quickly take the man out with a stealth attack. With his mission all but accomplished, there's little left to do but spring the inmates and watch them set upon the thugs, raising their fear level, and making the mop-up that much easier.

To keep the fear visceral and immediate, the game's designers are striving to keep the action constant. "We want to keep players in control of the action—when they're in control, that's when it's most exciting," Schneider says. "We want to keep the cut-scenes to a minimum. We're really following the *Splinter Cell*, the *Halo*, the *Half-Life* model, trying to do as much as possible—not everything, obviously—as scripted events where we leave the player in control. Because once you grab control of that camera, you immediately rip them out of that situation, that scene."

A HARD DARK KNIGHT'S DAY'S WORK

Some of the most important pieces of the Batman mythos simply cannot be filled in today. This is the first time EA has shown *Begins* to anyone outside of the company, and Schneider and his associates are mindful of what they can—and cannot—say.

"You'll see a lot of characters from the origin story of Batman," Caiazzo says, "including Commissioner—then Lieutenant—Gordon." Wayne's English butler Alfred Pennyworth feeds Batman intelligence during the game, and Gary Sheinwald, producer for Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment notes cryptically, "There are some special guest appearances that are exclusive to the game."

Most, if not all, of Batman's toys will be included in the game. It will be possible to use Batarangs, optic cables, and flashbang grenades (among others) either found in environments or included in Batman's wondrous utility belt; two devices can be mapped to the Xbox controller's White and Black buttons for easy use. And EA hasn't forgotten about the Batmobile, although no one will discuss its role within gameplay.

Batman's new day dawns this summer, and EA plans to release its game at the same time as the film. While it's still too early to properly gauge the film or its game adaptation, indications are that both Warner Bros. Interactive and EA are as serious as a heart attack about making both skull-crushing hits. //

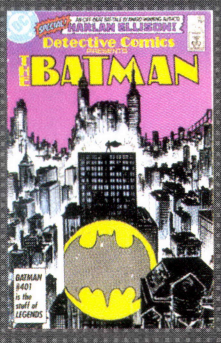
BATMAN'S BRAINTRUST
Antony Caiazzo, Reid Schneider, and Deni Skeens.

FIVE GREAT BATMAN STORIES

Since the release of Detective Comics #27 some 65 years ago, DC Comics' Batman has had his share of embarrassing adventures. But to comic-book hell with those. Here are five of his greatest tales:

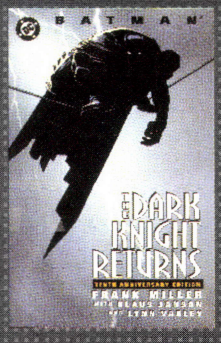
DETECTIVE COMICS #475 AND #476

The villainous Joker wants a patent on his killer "Joker Fish." Although the premise is fairly ridiculous, writer Steve Englehart and artist Marshall Rogers pull this two-parter off brilliantly.



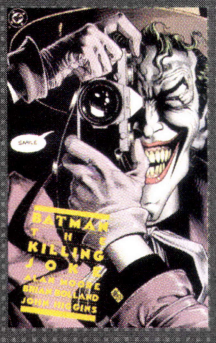
DETECTIVE COMICS #567

"The Night of Thanks, but No Thanks" is one of the most offbeat Batman tales ever told. Science-fiction author Harlan Ellison takes the Dark Knight on a tour of Gotham when nothing's doing and no one wants saving.



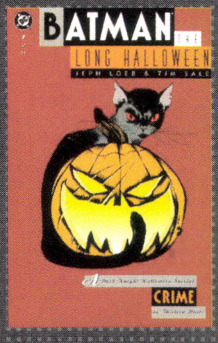
BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

Writer and artist Frank Miller tells the tale of a fifty-something Batman who comes out of retirement to fight the system, kick the crap out of Superman, and restore order to Gotham City. Simply perfect.



BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE

The Joker busts out of Arkham Asylum, shoots Batgirl in the spine, captures Commissioner Gordon, and attempts to drive him insane. Writer Alan Moore's surprise ending has to be seen to be believed.



BATMAN: THE LONG HALLOWEEN

A creepy 13-part murder mystery has Batman trying to track down a serial killer who murders his victims with a holiday theme. Who's the killer the press has dubbed Holiday? Good luck trying to piece it together.

EMPIRE BUILDERS

As BioWare's "love poem to martial arts movies," *Jade Empire*, inches closer to release, *XBN* investigates the Xbox's last great RPG

WORDS: EVAN SHAMOON
PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN ULAN

Peter Molyneux's now-infamous proclamation that *Fable* would be "the greatest role-playing game of all time" might have come as something of a challenge to a company full of egos larger than those at BioWare. The studio's joint CEOs, Dr. Ray Muzyka and Dr. Greg Zeschuk, are too humble, or perhaps too media savvy, to make such bold claims themselves (or better yet, too unwilling to eat their own words). Instead, the 200-plus-person outfit remains hard at work in its inconspicuous Edmonton, Canada-based studio, churning out superb role-playing games for Xbox and PC. Each game improves upon the last in slow, measured paces, a process BioWare sees as being at the core of what it does best. "We think story is the future of games," Muzyka says, summing up in one fell stroke the company's design philosophy.

When pressed to critique *Fable*, the doctors choose their words carefully. "Once I changed my expectations, I actually really enjoyed it quite a bit," Muzyka says of his experience with Lionhead's recent attempt at the RPG throne. "I guess it just wasn't what I was expecting. It was more of an action-adventure, really. Something more along the lines of...I don't know, *Zelda*?"

"One thing that disappointed me about the game was the general lack of consequence," Zeschuk recalls. "I don't feel that they really nailed that element of it—I didn't really feel like my actions mattered all that much." He pauses, raps his fingers against the table, and continues with a smile. "Other than that, I quite enjoyed it."

BIO WHERE?

In many ways, BioWare and Lionhead have been chasing the same lofty goal: to create a compelling gameplay experience in which the player's values and personality are properly reflected by his or her onscreen avatar. The difference, of course, lies in the approach: From *Populous* to *Black & White*, Molyneux's and Lionhead's foundation has always rested in simulation-style "God games," while BioWare's background rests in narrative structure, an ongoing refinement of "interactive storytelling." So much so, in fact, that over the past several years, BioWare has solidified its place as the premier RPG developer in the Western world. Its name has become an assurance of quality and in many ways synonymous with the genre itself. The term "BioWare-style RPG" is used to describe a game that fuses a deep *D&D*-style stat system with a dense story and compelling characters. It is what many developers aspire toward, but few achieve.

JADE EMPIRE DOES NOT FEEL LIKE AN RPG WITH TACKED-ON ACTION ELEMENTS; IT FEELS—CRUCIALLY—LIKE AN ACTION GAME WITH A VAST RPG BACK END.

And now, after winning nearly every prize the industry has to offer (*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* was awarded literally dozens of "Game of the Year" awards—from CNN, the Game Developers Conference, Amazon.com, and many other sources), BioWare has ditched the lightsabers and Wookiees for throwing stars and demons. It has taken Zeschuk and Muzyka nearly 10 years to make *Jade Empire*; it is BioWare's first original universe, the game the company has always wanted to make. It's an attempt to merge Hong Kong–style action with the depth and open-ended gameplay that has long been BioWare's hallmark. So now the obvious question lingers: Will *Jade Empire* be the best RPG ever made?

A THOUSAND WORDS

The first thing you notice about the game is that it's technically stunning. This is not only Xbox's best-looking RPG, but also one of the console's best-looking games, full stop. At a glance, one might mistake it for a Team Ninja production rather than a title from a notoriously PC-minded developer like BioWare. While plenty of RPGs have certainly been easy on the eyes—the *Final Fantasy* series springs to mind—*Jade Empire* looks like an action game. That is to say, the game's disparate elements look comfortable where they are: Characters blend seamlessly with their backgrounds, animations maintain their physical and mechanical integrity under gameplay duress, and real-time special effects abound.

Jade Empire does not feel like an RPG with tacked-on action elements; it feels—crucially—like an action game with a vast RPG back end. It's an important distinction; even the award-sweeping

■ Master the art of summoning and sorcery to subdue your enemies (top) or... Simply kill 'em the old-fashioned way (bottom).

Do the monster mash: Summoning monsters to do your bidding becomes an important part of combat.

"...A REAL-TIME COMBAT SYSTEM SEEMS LIKE THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP FOR OUR GAMES—PARTICULARLY OUR CONSOLE TITLES." — JIM BISHOP, PRODUCER

KOTOR ran into considerable problems when it came to technology and required a certain suspension of disbelief specific to the RPG-playing crowd. The prospect of watching stiffly animated characters politely take turns assaulting one another—their attacks marred by poor collision detection and a wholesale lack of visceral response—is, to some, simply unpalatable.

Of course, rebuilding the combat system from the ground up hasn't been a walk in the dojo. "Real-time fighting has forced us to rethink many of our beliefs about player rewards, pacing, challenge, and story, and has taken a ton of work to pull off," *Jade*'s producer Jim Bishop says. "We went to all this trouble because a real-time combat system seems like the next logical step for our games—particularly our console titles. We want to make our games appealing and accessible to the widest possible audience, and real-time combat is one part of that package." Not only a part of the package, this point is at the forefront of everyone's mind, from fans to journalists to everyone we spoke with at BioWare. The company has certainly proven that it can tell a winding, epic 30-hour interactive narrative; it has not, however, proven itself to be capable of creating action that can sustain itself for the duration of a winding, epic 30-hour story.

Each of *Jade Empire*'s six playable characters can readily switch between three distinctly robust combat styles, each with its own subset of attacks you can learn.

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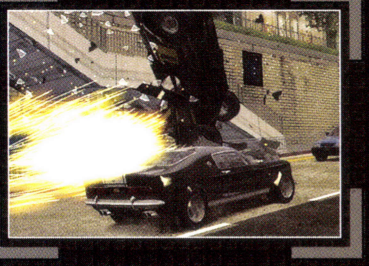

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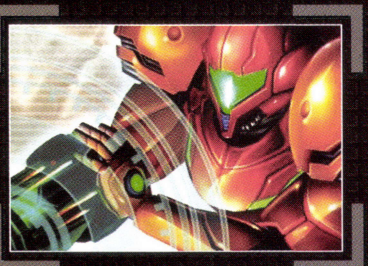

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EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Which brings us back to the question of consequence. "Freedom" has always been a major tenet of BioWare games, in terms of character and narrative structure. With a fully interactive combat system, is it now possible to give the player the same freedom in second-to-second combat as he or she is given in a more gradual, methodical narrative?

"We've really worked at keeping a sense of choice in the combat system," Kevin Martens, the game's lead designer, says. "Mashing buttons until your opponent falls down is a great place to start, but you are [also] given a wide selection of tactical options." From what we've seen thus far, gameplay feels good—but perhaps more important, fighting is fun.

The combat itself is nothing if not varied. Each of the game's six characters can switch between any of three distinct styles (martial arts, weapons, and transformation/summoning, with four to seven moves per style) at any given moment, allowing for strategic improvisation within battles. Martens continues: "Each combat [scenario] presents you with a new type or combination of opponents, and we want players to find their own way to deal with the problem. Try to take down a group of ogres with magical fire and then try again with dual sabers. Both options are valid, and we want players to be able to find their own combinations of styles to deal with the myriad encounters that we'll throw at them."

IMPREZZA

At this stage of development, *Jade Empire* has proven itself able to surpass all expectations. From multitiered teahouses to pirate hideaways, the environments present the opportunity both to explore and to beat the sense out of many, many enemies in their natural habitats.

As for fans worried about *Jade Empire* straying too far from the BioWare formula?

Edmonds doesn't mince words: "*Jade Empire* is first and last a role-playing game. It has a sweeping story, compelling themes, and rich characters, as well as plenty of mechanics under the hood, and no one will confuse it for a simplistic game."

Whether it's a recipe for "the best RPG ever made" somehow seems irrelevant; if it's the best BioWare game ever made, that will be just fine, thank you very much. //

Although combat in *Jade Empire* is hectic, you can always slow the game down to open menus and strategize.

"MASHING BUTTONS IS A GREAT PLACE TO START, BUT YOU ARE ALSO GIVEN A WIDE SELECTION OF [COMBAT] OPTIONS." — KEVIN MARTENS, LEAD DESIGNER

JADED EMPIRE

Role-playing in a Time of Political Correctness

What of the fact that BioWare—a thoroughly Western developer remotely situated in the Great White North—has decided to make a game about...ancient China? Sensitivities vary, of course; Japanese developers have been making games about subjects existing far outside of their immediate sphere of knowledge for decades (e.g., *Metal Gear Solid*, a game steeped in Western military culture and conspiracy theories). There's something significantly more sacred about *Jade*'s subject matter, certainly, and this is something BioWare seems to have taken to heart. "The entire team is extremely passionate about *Jade Empire*, and we've worked very hard to make sure that the world we create is well realized," Greg Zeschuk says. "It's important to point out that we're creating a fictional world, so the bounds of reality are frequently stretched in order to further the game content and story. We've done a lot of work to gather top-quality reference material that we use to build the worlds." Unlike old kung fu flicks, characters in *Jade Empire* speak fluent English, sparing the audience the faux authenticity provided by "ethnic" accents and mispronunciations. (And for what it's worth, not a single *Xbox Nation* eye rolled during the hour's worth of *Jade Empire* to which we have been privy thus far.)

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BLUE STEAL

WORDS: CHE CHOU
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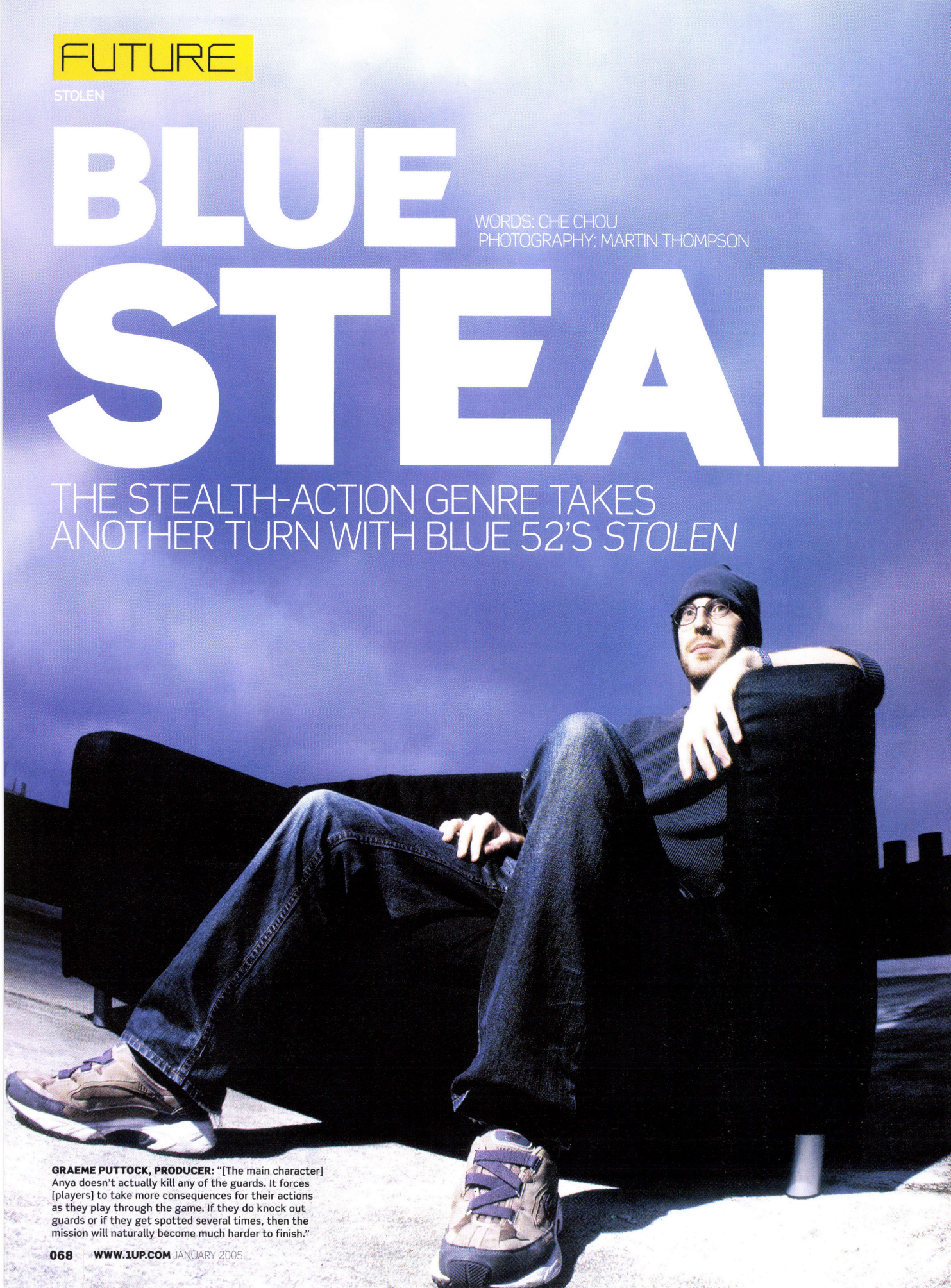
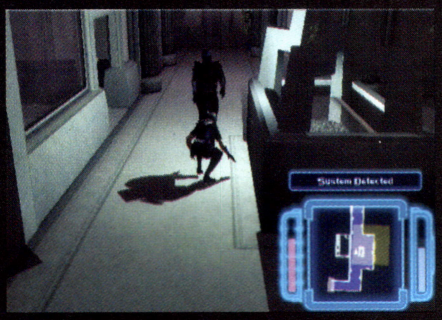
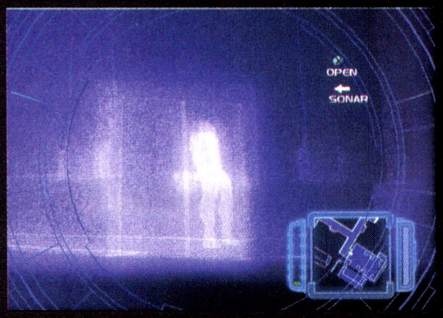
THE STEALTH-ACTION GENRE TAKES ANOTHER TURN WITH BLUE 52'S *STOLEN*



GRAEME PUTTOCK, PRODUCER: "[The main character] Anya doesn't actually kill any of the guards. It forces [players] to take more consequences for their actions as they play through the game. If they do knock out guards or if they get spotted several times, then the mission will naturally become much harder to finish."





Due north of the urban combustion that makes up most of central London lies the town of Camden, where independent game developer Blue 52 is quietly applying its craft to a stealth-action genre dangerously on the verge of stagnation. The culmination of the team's many long evenings arrives in the form of *Stolen*, a sleeper title with the surprising potential to deliver a revitalizing shock to the system—if everything goes according to plan.

The idea to develop a stealth game inspired by grand-theft antics from movies like *Entrapment* and *The Thomas Crowne Affair* traces back to the studio's earliest roots. "We started Blue 52 back in 1999," Jason Perkins, the studio's managing director and one of the founding members of the team, recalls. Starting with a background in homebrew game development on the Commodore 64, Perkins' 22-year industry journey has carried him from the garage to the offices of companies like Sony and now-defunct publishing giant GT Interactive.

Perkins' connections to various talents in the industry formed the nexus of the new team. According to Perkins, the company's moniker—Blue 52—was the next element to crystallize. "We wanted to come up with this wacky and crazy name, but we also wanted a name that, five years from now, we wouldn't feel embarrassed about," he says. To that end, the team members wrote down a list of colors, preferring to choose one that spoke to their collective personality yet remained ambiguous enough for growth down the years. Their "eureka!" moment came during an episode of *The Simpsons*, when Homer revealed the color of Marge's hair dye—"blue 52."

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

As *Stolen* nears its spring 2005 release date, the studio has allocated more than 40 people to finishing the game. Guiding the project to completion is Producer Graeme Puttock, Art Director Jaid Mindang, and Level Designer Jonathan Biddle. As principle members on the *Stolen* design team, all three exude a heartening passion for their work. Hardcore gamers in every sense of the definition, they talk excitedly about life on Xbox Live with *Halo 2* or the infinite freedoms of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. It's clear that influences from the games they play have made a huge impact on the overall design of their own brainchild. In fact, an initial playtest of *Stolen* shows that the game is a loose amalgamation of *Splinter Cell*'s shadow-play and gadget worship, *Prince of Persia*'s athleticism and platforming challenges, and the compulsive kleptomania of *Thief: Deadly Shadows*.

"Obviously, there are things that everyone loves about those titles and things that people don't like," Puttock explains, describing the process of cherry-picking the best elements from games appropriate to *Stolen*'s gameplay motif. "Later in the game, you have things like timed sections, which kind of hearken to *Prince of Persia*, where you have to perhaps hit a switch to disable some security systems, and then you've got a specific amount of time to get through that. We wanted a game that is more fluid and allows the player to have fun just moving around the environment, rather than having to do this very sort of slow and stealthy navigation."

But the inevitable question looms: Does the world need yet another stealth-action game? The justification for *Stolen* lies in the team's unique take on the tired old sneaking game. What sets *Stolen* apart from the usual suspects is ultimately more than just the sum of its...well, stolen parts. The game's secret sauce is, in fact, Blue 52 itself, and the company's insistence on creating console gaming's first "pure" stealth-action title.

STEALING BEAUTY

You slip into the catsuit of Anya Romanov, a slinky, *La Femme Nikita*-inspired thief who's hired for a series of politically motivated snatches. "The whole thing about Anya is that she's supposed to be this very live and able sort of thief. We watched a lot of Hollywood-style heist movies, and they always have those really cool characters get into their target buildings, always one step ahead of the security," Puttock says.

"Our angle was always to gear it more toward subterfuge and stealth, and not a guns and

STOLEN HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DELIVER A REVITALIZING SHOCK TO STEALTH-ACTION GAMING.

Stolen uses Blue 52's proprietary Blue View engine, allowing the game to render exquisite real-time lighting and shadow effects.

JONATHAN BIDDLE, DESIGNER: "Once you get to the thing that you're actually stealing at the end, we kind of flip the pace around. Now it's all about leaving in a blaze of fury. Guards get called in, helicopters chase after you—the pace ramps up and it's all about using your athleticism to get out as quickly as possible."

"Anya's not your typical, large-breasted male fantasy. She lacks the clichéd sex-symbol attributes." —Jaid Mindang, art director

SINCE YOU CAN'T KILL GUARDS, *STOLEN* IS A GAME CHARACTERIZED BY THE CONSTANT PRESSURE OF BEING ON THE RUN.

military route [like *Splinter Cell*]," Art Director Jaid Mindang explains. "The essence of cool for us in those movies is being able to get in and get out and not be seen or heard at all, rather than having a body count racking up as you go through the level." To give *Stolen* that specific non-confrontational, ninjalike vibe, Puttock and his team decided early on to limit Anya to a set of useful but ultimately nonlethal attacks.

As far as melee attacks, Anya has the ability to punish her enemies with a flurry of attack combos (including one especially painful-looking crotch kick). Smacking the guards around knocks them on their backs, but nobody is ever out for good. "That was a design decision we took pretty much from the outset for a few reasons," Puttock says. "The first is from a design point of view: We took a lot of time placing the guards in these specific positions. For a player to be able to go through and just pop them from a distance, and then run through an empty area, kind of defeats the point of the game."

ONCE A THIEF

As such, *Stolen* is a game characterized by the constant pressure of being on the run from the fuzz—not unlike playing as a spy in *Pandora Tomorrow*'s multiplayer game. This is the "pure stealth" philosophy that Blue 52 is pursuing. To equalize the odds, Anya is armed with an arsenal of high-tech gadgets, the most important of which is a multipurpose pistol. This handgun fires a variety of munitions, including tracking chips that paint your target and its "cone of view" onto your radar, as well as sonic emitters for distracting guards and nullifier rounds to take out security cameras. The pistol's handy sonar device also lets you see through doors before entering.

In specific instances, Anya can also use her vertical traverse wire to lower herself down into heavily watched areas full of coveted treasures. Gameplay mechanics during these portions become almost a minigame unto themselves as you carefully avoid setting off security systems.

Beyond just a mistress of gadgets, Anya is, at heart, a skilled pickpocket. As such, you're always mindful of the extra little reward you can swipe anywhere in a facility, including valuable information or loot from the guards themselves. Sneaking up to steal from a sentry triggers a frantic, time-based minigame in which success or failure can be the difference between needed security cards or death.

Anya is also an acrobatic thief who relies on her agility and tiny stature to go places where others may not. Her abilities to scale walls, climb into air ducts, swing around on bars, and walk on environmental tightropes often make her an unseen predator behind enemy lines. Each of the levels in *Stolen*, besides being one giant interconnected playground with minimal loading times, has been designed with Anya's sprightliness in mind. Oftentimes, the most direct route to an objective may not be the smartest one to take.

SENTIMENTALLY SENTIENT

With shadows, gadgets, and dexterity on her side, Anya must put these assets to the test against *Stolen*'s natural inhabitants—the night watch. Our hands-on time gave us one lasting impression of the game thus far: It's very, very tough, thanks in particular to the tenacious enemy A.I.

"We look at A.I. as kind of a science," Senior Programmer Richard Turner says. "[*Splinter Cell*'s] A.I. is OK, but it's not great. They're doing some pretty standard things, and when the enemies are chasing you, it feels like they're kind of cheating."

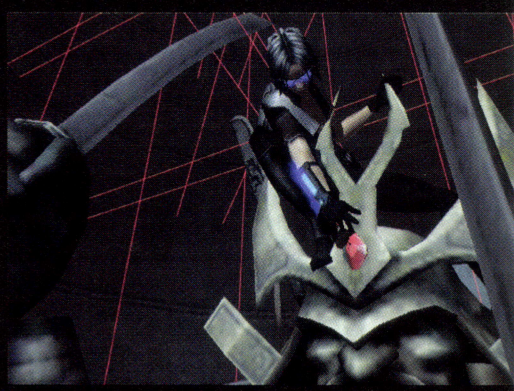
By "cheating," Turner is referring to A.I. that always magically know where you're hiding once you've triggered their heightened sense of alert, even if in-game, the A.I. haven't actually received stimuli that would clue them in to your whereabouts. Since you can't actually remove enemy guards from the playing field, the A.I. threat is a constant in *Stolen*.

"You've got two levels of A.I. There's the A.I. just going on with their business, and that's got to be believable, so they're not just doing scripted things. They'll walk into each other and chat, for instance," Turner explains. "But once they're aware of you, they'll actually make decisions about where they think you are, rather than knowing exactly where you are. That's one of the biggest challenges: trying to make them look convincingly imperfect."

While the A.I. in *Stolen* won't be passing any Turing tests for humanlike behavior, they demonstrated incredible tenacity during our hands-on playtime. Our attempt at trying to outmuscle the A.I. by sneaking up behind them and putting them in choke holds was mostly met by brutal, point-blank gunshots to the face.

And although *Stolen* is a stealth-action game, you simply can't play this one like you'd play any other on the market. Outwitting the A.I. requires all your resources and plenty of patience.

The differences between Stolen and its many competitors are subtle, to be sure, and playing the game is a constant reminder of that fact. "The whole stealth market is now pretty much inundated," Mindang says. "Although we've got a large element of stealth in *Stolen*, we sort of want the player to experience what it's like to be a thief—this great athletic ability to get around the environment on a really stylish map. We definitely try and keep away from the general stealth military themes everyone else is doing." //



Anya's thieving skills translate well into minigames.

HIGH CRIMES

"I've never had a problem with drugs. I've had problems with the police." —Keith Richards

WORDS: EVAN SHAMOON PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL SEXTON

The relationship between videogames and drugs has a long and storied past. The addictive qualities of games have been an enduring source of fascination, providing countless (damning) comparisons throughout pop culture. There's the distressed parent ("My son is addicted to Xbox! It's like a drug!") whose sentiments are, in fact, also echoed by the hardcore gamer ("Dude, *Halo 2* on Xbox Live—it's crack."). It's no coincidence, then, that a history-of-videogames documentary recently broadcast on cable television ran immediately following a program about the negative effects of drugs, as well as a discussion of the energy-drink industry's primary 12- to 27-year-old male gamer target demographic.

So it only seemed like a matter of time until someone developed a title that allowed players to actually do virtual drugs—not to mention become virtually addicted to them over the course of the game. "We're not encouraging the use of drugs," insists Wayne Cline, producer of Midway's upcoming Xbox crime spree, *NARC*. "In a lot of games, you shoot somebody and you pick up their gun. This is a game about being an undercover narc officer—you arrest people and you pick up their drugs. So the natural question was: What do you do with them?"

TRICKLE-DOWN NARCOTICS

NARC is a remake of the 1988 side-scrolling arcade game of the same name in which player-controlled narcotics officers with heavy weaponry strolled down city streets, mowing down suspected drug pushers. Designed by Eugene Jarvis (the mind behind such enduring classics as *Robotron* and *Defender*), *NARC* featured some of the most intense, graphic violence in any videogame at the time, all of it directed at your garden-variety drug dealer stereotype. In the government's eyes, this made *NARC* the perfect antidrug propaganda, and the game became one of many pop-cultural media mouthpieces for Ronald and Nancy Reagan's war on substance abuse.

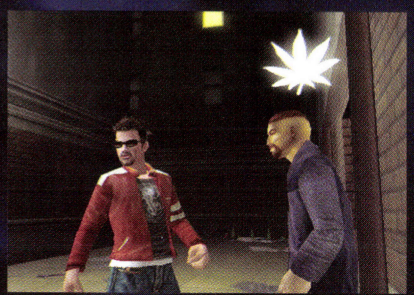
Fast-forward 16 years to today. The remake takes the same premise and reappropriates it for a generation weaned on antiheroes and *Grand Theft Auto*. Protagonists Marcus Hill and Jack Forzenski are not simply given the task of administering rough justice on drug dealers, they're afforded the opportunity to confiscate the criminals' stashes and administer them to "power up." Marijuana, LSD, crystal methamphetamines, and crack cocaine are all available for consumption, each providing you with its own form of enhanced mental and physical abilities (see High Noon sidebar page 81).

It's essentially the ultimate sign of the changing times. Gaming comes of age, and suddenly, its legendary abstractions (e.g., Mario munching on a 'shroom in a magical kingdom) take on a new stark urban reality. But will there be a documentary about the negative effects of drugs on the gaming industry?

ALL HOPPED UP ON GOOFBALLS

Just as is the case in that remarkably realistic game called "real life," there's an element of risk involved with being a virtual doper as well. The consequence of being a full-time dope fiend is, of course, addiction—which manifests itself in *NARC* as none other than...a minigame. Shortly after smoking, snorting, or mainlining your drug of choice, you'll begin to feel the pangs of dependence. Just as it is in real life,

XBN will speak nothing of racial stereotypes in videogames—especially ones involving drug dealers.



NARC IS ABOUT BEING AN UNDERCOVER COP WHO CONFISCATES DRUGS. THE QUESTION IS: ONCE YOU HAVE IT, WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT?

A SANDBOX MODE PERSISTS THROUGHOUT *NARC*, WHERE YOU'RE ABLE TO STRAY FROM THE STORY AND PREVENT (OR COMMIT) CRIMES.

Turn on, tune in, and drop out. Just as in real-life, taking acid in *Narc* lets you to see evil clowns and drug dealers.

any mission goals are immediately overridden by the gameplay urgency to basically stockpile more of the same dope that fed your high. When your addiction meter peaks, you go into withdrawal; at this point, you have five seconds to either take the same drug again or purchase a substitute called protodone (the game's very expensive methadone equivalent), which gets you off of the addiction immediately.

If neither of these options proves possible, you're thrust into a timing-based minigame: pass the challenge and you continue, until some time later when temptation (read: the minigame) arises again. Should you fail three consecutive times, however, your character will lose consciousness and awaken in surroundings unknown, having completely lost all of his inventory items.

"The first game was all gung-ho, kill all the junkies in the digitized brown coats," *NARC*'s Creative Director Tom Hall says. "But this game is more about teaching you through experience. It's not saying, 'Hey, those are bad, just say no!' It's saying, 'Look, if you take [drugs], bad things happen.'" (But presumably—in the context of how drugs also give you superhuman powers in the game—good things happen as well.)

Go the route of the junkie and you'll lose status on the police force as well; one too many slip-ups and you're bumped down from undercover agent to uniformed beat cop. Take another dip and you're suddenly what Hall refers to as a "civilian junkie jobless guy," with the humble task of trying to regain your old position. Once you're kicked down to police officer, the game's story-based missions are off-limits, and you must instead run around *NARC*'s crime-filled city in sandbox mode, busting criminals and (properly) confiscating drugs to get your badge rating back up to snuff. Crude as it may be, the design behind *NARC*'s drug use makes uncanny sense and should also serve to provide some substantial ethical defense for publisher Midway when the conservative groups come knocking (which they undoubtedly will).

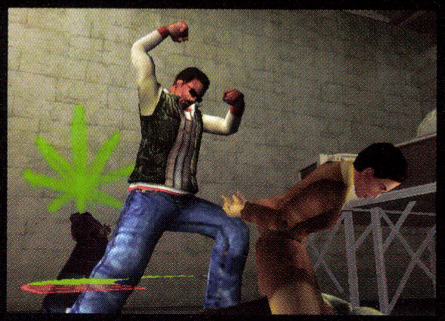
BUT...WHERE THE HELL WAS I?

It should be noted that there's more to *NARC* than just huffing virtual psychoactives. A comprehensive story line runs through the game, a linear narrative full of double-crosses, shady dealings, and two morally questionable protagonists whose worst enemies may, in fact, be themselves. ("When we were working on the game," Hall recalls, "one major [influence] was the film *Rush*—the story of an undercover drug cop who's tempted into the dark side of the job.")

Structurally, the game is now-standard fare: Using *Grand Theft Auto* as the model, players hustle on foot through two major cities, based roughly on Chicago and Tokyo, busting perps and completing missions to advance the plot. A sandbox mode persists throughout, where you're able to stray from the story and prevent (or commit) crimes. As with the drug use, there's a price for excessive violence, which results in detracted badge points and, hence, a significantly more difficult path to the finish line. Our hands-on playtest, however, left something to be desired in terms of control; aiming feels loose, and moving your character around lacks precision. Suffice it to say, gameplay remains Midway's biggest hurdle if *NARC* is to fulfill its ambitious vision when the game ships in the spring of 2005.

In many ways, *NARC* comes across as an utterly generic third-person "urban" action game at first glance: *Grand Theft Auto* without the driving, *True Crime* without the real city, and all of the above with the addition of copious drug abuse. But Hall believes that it's not the genre, but rather the content, that should define a game such as *NARC*. "I think we're going for a more difficult story than a lot of games do," he says. "It's not like Ben Affleck's in a movie and says, 'Oh no, Mel Gibson's in a cop movie, too!' No, we're just telling a story and having an interesting interactive experience.

"I think people thought we were taking the subject lightly initially, but we're trying to be part of the slow, painful moving of videogaming into a real medium in which you can tell any kind of story to whatever demographic you want." //



HIGH SKOOL

Really, the very fact a sidebar such as this one even exists must be a real thorn in the sides of many. But gaze anyway upon the drugs you can take, some of which are based loosely on their real-life counterparts. Here's how high you'll get if you just say "yes!"

MARIJUANA: The least harmful and least addictive of the lot, everybody's favorite gateway drug provides players with several precious moments of *Matrix*-style bullet time, in which time slows down but the player's ability to aim does not. The only downside is that the screen sways back and forth, recalling several movies starring Robert De Niro and directed by Martin Scorsese.

LSD: This is most visual of *NARC*'s drugs. Dropping acid brings on intense visuals and helps players sort out what really matters: The heads of innocent civilians are replaced with clown heads, while those of criminals become horned devil craniums. The downside, of course, is that you lose all sense of direction (through a control mechanic) because you're so damn fried.

CRYSTAL METH: Rather than making your heart beat so fast it feels like it's about to pop out of your chest, *NARC*'s speed is similar to steroids and will make you run really, really fast. Of course, it wouldn't be a drug without side effects, as you'll learn firsthand once the paranoia (disembodied whispers, unexplained objects, etc.) sets in.

CRACK: The least logical digital translation of *NARC*'s illegal substances, crack makes you a "crack shot," meaning you're more likely to land head shots, and more powerful when surrounded by multiple enemies. We're guessing the creative license had something to do with the fact that talking out loud about your fascination with Sammy Davis Jr.'s fingernails and how they remind you of the first time you rode your bike to Jupiter simply isn't fun (unless you're on crack).

LIQUID SOUL: Immediately addictive—try it once and you're hooked. It's a brawling drug, meaning that you'll become a one-man wrecking machine, smashing people to bloody pulps with one punch...kinda like PCP without being on TV. The downside of Liquid Soul is that it substitutes all NPC character models with the game's thug models, meaning half of those bloody pulps will likely end up being grandmothers and small children.

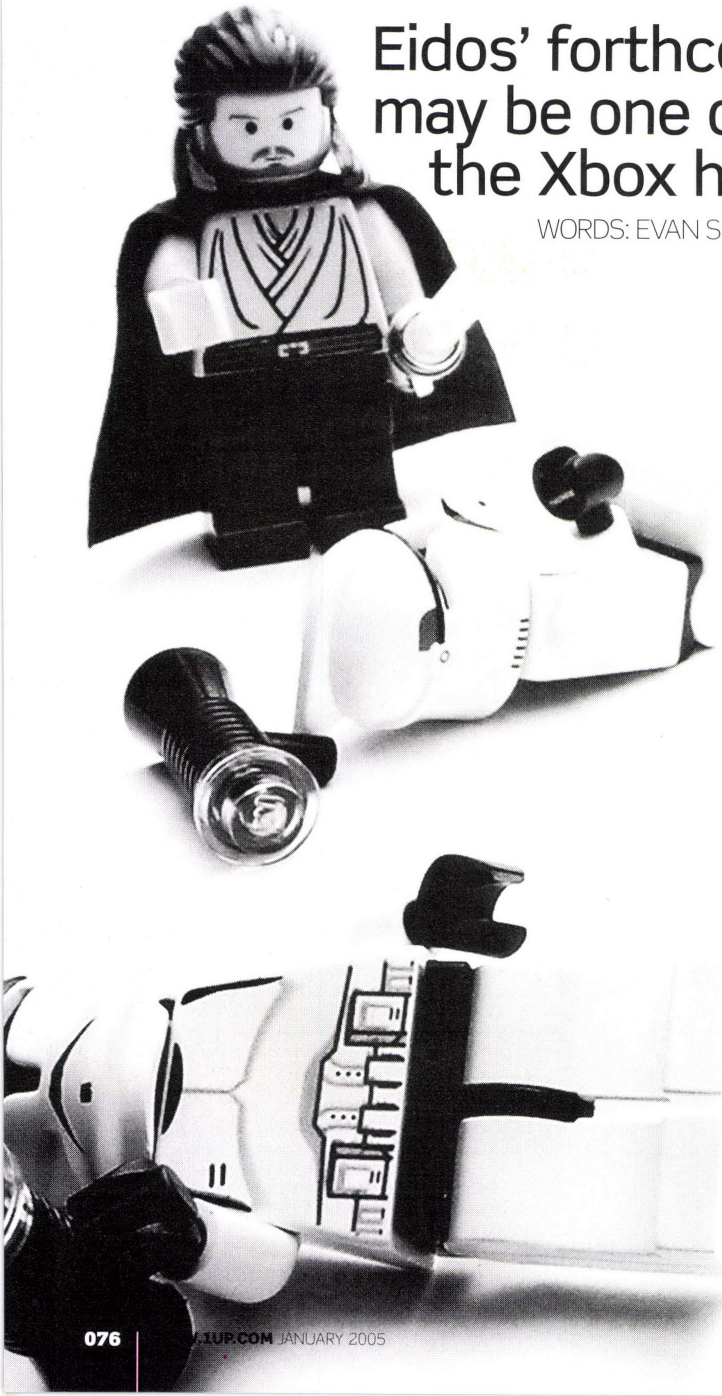
(Left) Wayne Cline, producer on *NARC*, has been in the industry for 14 years, where most of his time has been spent crafting LucasArts classics like *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter*, *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine*, and many others.

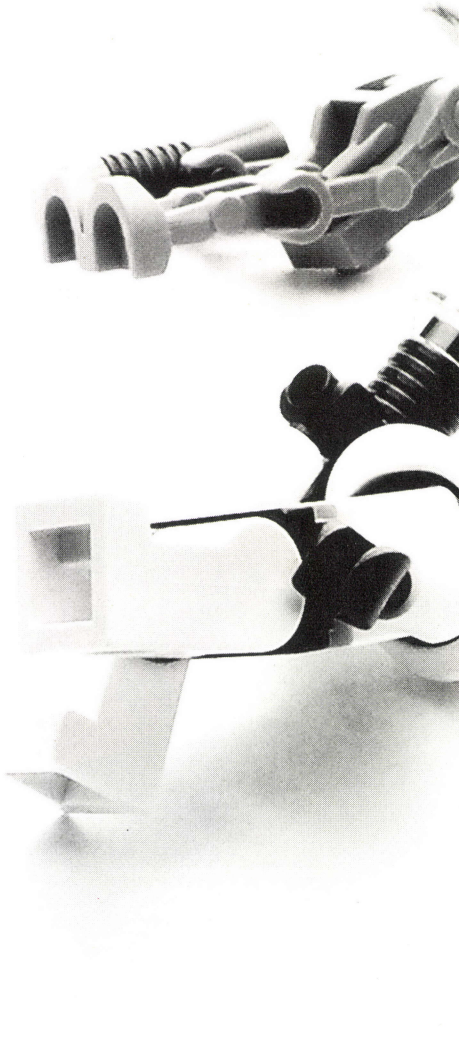
(Right) Tom Hall, creative director at Midway helped guide the overall design for *NARC*, including the effects of drugs and their addiction. Before Midway, Hall was a co-founder of id Software, having worked on many influential titles there.

TOY ST

Eidos' forthcoming *Lego Star Wars* may be one of the most original titles the Xbox has ever seen

WORDS: EVAN SHAMOON PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW MENDOZA





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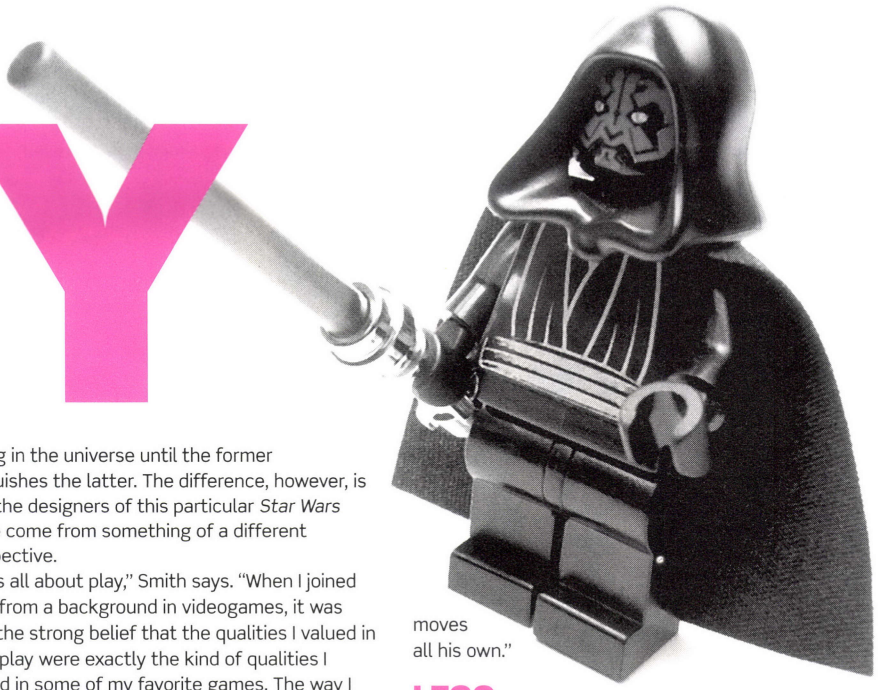


Nintendo's game-design demigod Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of *Mario*, *Zelda*, and countless other classics of old, has emphasized repeatedly that great games should possess the characteristics of excellent toys.

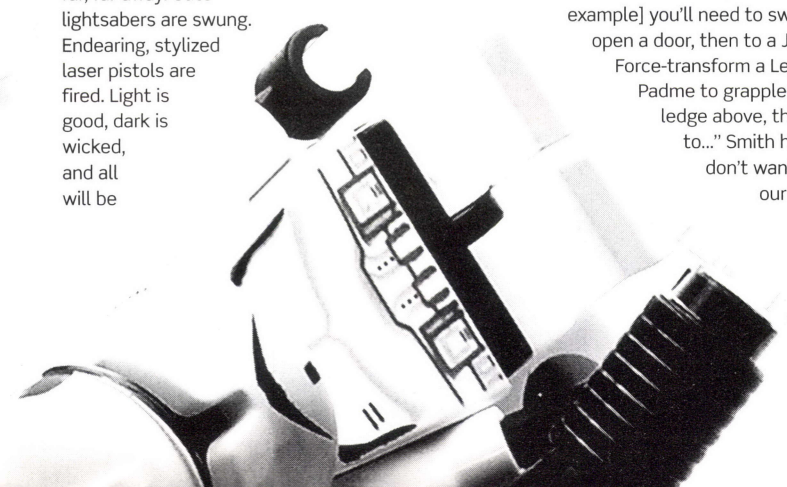
Given this context, the notion of wedding *Star Wars* and Lego in digital matrimony makes a bit more sense. It would be difficult to imagine two more nostalgic properties in all of contemporary Western civilization, and in many ways, both seem tailor-made for videogames. "Lego is the world's strongest toy brand, and *Star Wars* is the biggest movie series in history," Jonathan Smith, development director at *Lego Star Wars*' publisher Giant Interactive, points out . "And that makes them a completely natural fit. The first Lego Star Wars toys launched in 1999, and it's been Lego's most successful range of all time. So the question for the game was not so much 'Should we do this?' but 'Why didn't we think of it sooner?' We had all these aspirations and ideas for a cool character-action *Lego* videogame—and where better to take them than into the epic *Star Wars* universe, full of drama and populated by the world's favorite characters?" Sometimes it really is just that simple, apparently.

LOST TOYS

On its surface—and perhaps at its heart—*Lego Star Wars* is a linear third-person action game in which players visit a series of familiar locations and set pieces from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Cute lightsabers are swung. Endearing, stylized laser pistols are fired. Light is good, dark is wicked, and all will be wrong in the universe until the former vanquishes the latter. The difference, however, is that the designers of this particular *Star Wars* game come from something of a different perspective.

"It's all about play," Smith says. "When I joined Lego from a background in videogames, it was with the strong belief that the qualities I valued in Lego play were exactly the kind of qualities I valued in some of my favorite games. The way I felt absorbed in Lego play seemed fundamentally linked to those game experiences. Lego are world leaders in play, with a 75-year heritage and a dedication to the pursuit and analysis of that play experience. And the more I tapped into all the thinking and research they were doing, the more I was able to translate those values into game features and goals."

It makes sense, then, given the approach and history of its designers, that Giant's game allows for much of the same sort of flexibility the Lego toys are famous for. As players progress, for example, they unlock characters that can then be taken back into previous scenes. By combining their unique skills with those of the characters already present in the level, it's possible to reach new areas—perhaps bringing to mind Blizzard's classic *The Lost Vikings*. It also only makes logical sense that players can switch between these various characters at any given moment: R2-D2, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and (shudder) Jar Jar Binks, to name but a few. Each character has different abilities and strengths, and careful management of these powers will be crucial to success. "We can set up challenges where [for example] you'll need to swap to R2-D2 to open a door, then to a Jedi character to Force-transform a Lego wall, then to Padme to grapple-hook up to the ledge above, then to Jango Fett to..." Smith hesitates. "Well, I don't want to give away all our secrets. Let's just say that Jango's got some pretty special moves all his own."



LEGO VERSUS REALITY

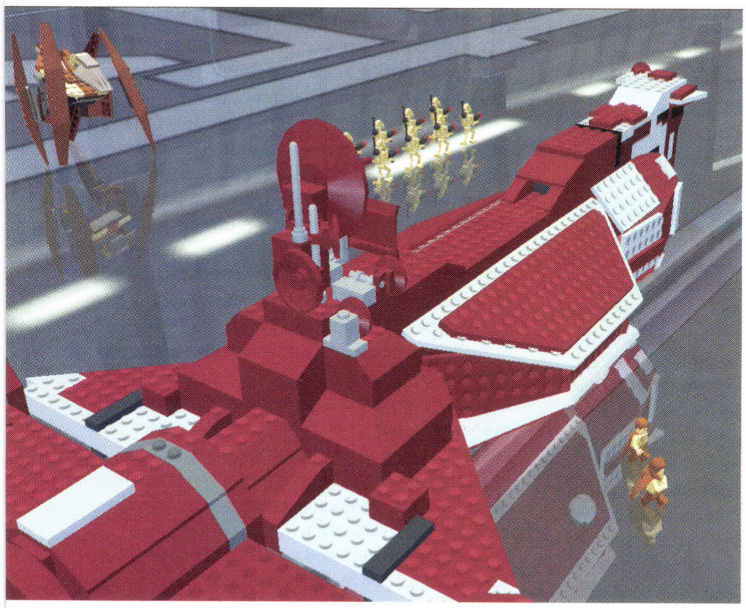
One of the central conceits of *Lego Star Wars* is that Lego represents interactivity; the characters and objects that inhabit this world are made of Legos, but the environments surrounding them are not. It might seem like a minor point, but it's a crucial distinction; not only does this extend the analogy to what it's like playing with Legos in real life (where the same distinction between "real" and "Lego" clearly exists), but it also gives the player an immediate and consistent guide to what's interactive and what's not. It's a slippery area where many games stumble (how many times have you wondered why nothing happens when you shoot a particular computer screen, when you shot one just like it five minutes earlier for a shower of sparks and exploding circuitry?), but it's one that *Lego Star Wars* happily embraces.

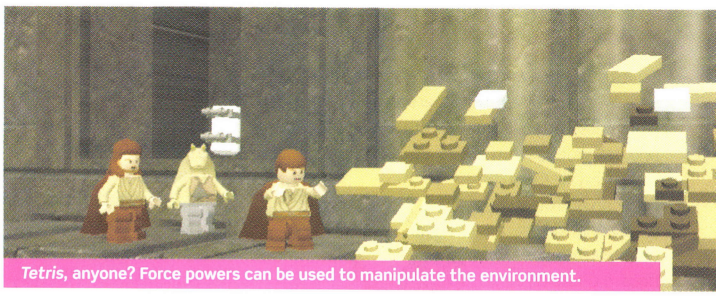
Smith elaborates: "Once we've established the rule that everything in the world that is made of Legos can be played with—can be interacted with in some way—then we find that players are instantly and instinctively drawn toward these Lego objects. You never encounter the problems of some game environments where you have to experiment to find which objects around your character are useful and which are noninteractive 'set dressing.' You recognize Lego without having to think about it, and if it's made of Legos, then you know you can jump on it, or move it, or smash it with your lightsaber, or shoot it with a blaster, or use the Force to transform it into something completely different."

LEGO MY JANGO

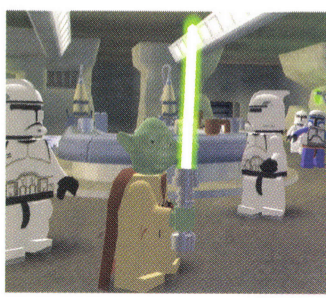
Of course, none of these philosophical underpinnings would matter much if the game

Federation droids are about as useful in Lego form as they are in the movies (read: not at all).





Tetris, anyone? Force powers can be used to manipulate the environment.

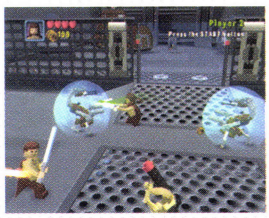


LEGO STAR WARS IS ONE OF THE MOST VISUALLY STRIKING GAMES WE'VE SEEN, OOZING THE STYLE OF ITS LICENSE FROM EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY.

didn't look the part. Fortunately, *Lego Star Wars* is one of the most visually striking games we've seen in years, oozing the style of its compound license from every nook and cranny. Characters move with the wooden grace of their real-life counterparts: Cylindrical heads rotate smoothly on a single axis, droids and troopers explode into their various individual pieces when defeated, and glowing Lego lightsabers extend with a satisfying "pzzcheeew" from your character's clawlike hands. There's something profoundly evocative about seeing individual Lego pieces, many of which you've likely forgotten about—the drinking mugs with exceptionally large handles, the computers with the sloped, pixilated screens—lovingly rendered in three dimensions. John Williams' original score provides an amusing juxtaposition; the epic, operatic soundtrack provides the sonic surroundings for the heroics of little plastic men.

LEGO, LUKE...

Legos have a certain look and a certain structure, and the game appears to have both of these elements firmly under control. But Legos also have a very distinctive feel, and the game is unlikely to succeed without a strong link to the actual feeling of playing with the little plastic bricks. It's another point at which videogames and toys intersect. Just as there is something undoubtedly special about holding Legos in your hands—as opposed to, say, Duplos, Best Locks, Mega Bloks, or even Kubricks—games require a grasp of this physical sensation. All puns intended, we're hoping that when *Lego Star Wars* comes together, everything will click perfectly. //



HARD AT PLAY

Lego Star Wars supports co-op play, meaning two players will be able to work simultaneously to (quite literally) dismantle the Lego Empire. Players will be able to exit and enter the game freely, as they would in an arcade game. "When you put that constant character-switching ability together with our two-player feature, you've got all kinds of possibilities," Giant Interactive's development director Jonathan Smith says. "I've seen people spend almost half an hour in a single room just messing about with a friend—character switching, battling each other, and trying to discover all the secrets of that one small area." While no Xbox Live play has been announced, Smith has an explanation, noting that there was a conscious attempt made to emulate the feeling of two friends playing with Lego's—something that's done live in person, not over a broadband connection.

FIGHT FOR LIFE

A new EA Sports title is never just a game. It's part of a dynasty, and *Fight Night 2005* strives to keep the rulers of boxing in power.

WORDS: KEVIN GIFFORD

When looking at Electronic Arts' 23-year timeline, you can mark out two separate eras in its history—before and after *Madden NFL 2001*. Although EA was already the major player in console sports games by the PlayStation era, the hyperrealism made possible during this generation took a hobbyist pursuit and turned it into a social phenomenon. Worldwide, EA had no less than 10 million-seller sports games in 2003, from football and basketball to snowboarding and golf, and the combined sales were enough to dwarf the revenue of nearly every other third-party publisher.

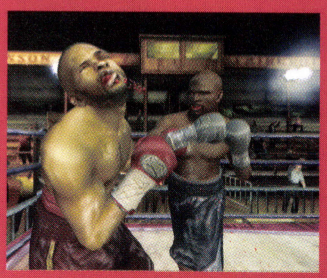
Due to this recent tradition of explosive EA Sports success, the pressure is on for every new franchise to excel, no matter what its subject matter. "EA's games come out on a yearly cycle, and they make sure they're innovating every year with a new feature," EA producer Kudo Tsunoda explains. "It's not a matter of making the game a little better; it's a matter of doing something innovative with every game you make." That's the task he's been assigned with *Fight Night 2005*, due out next spring for the Xbox. His job is to take a game that revolutionized boxing sims last year and somehow make it even more revolutionary.

Tsunoda—who is half-Japanese and named after his father's World War II pilot buddy—faced an uphill battle with the first *Fight Night* last year. Boxing is a second-tier sport in the United States that's been dogged by corrupt promoters and a lack of name-brand talent. "Boxers try to hold on to their titles," he laments. "The champions don't want to fight the promising newcomers because they're scared of losing their title and the paydays."

His team's solution: concentrate on the raw tenets of boxing and create a control system that keeps players coming back for more. "The great thing about boxing," Tsunoda says, "is that on some level, everyone knows how to box. It's not like memorizing a football playbook; you're just trying to hit the guy without getting hit yourself." That was the origin of Total Punch Control, a system that uses both analog sticks to give you more precision control over your fighter than any other boxing game, including, ironically, EA's own *Knockout Kings* series.

For *Fight Night 2005*, the main innovation lies in refining Total Punch Control to—in Tsunoda's words—"deal with button-mashing once and for all." Although gamers praised the analog-stick system, many boxing fans stuck to the traditional button-oriented controls, which were easier to score combos with. Having been refined this year, *Fight Night*'s punch system is faster and easier to deal with: Not only are combos pulled off more quickly, but haymaker punches, attacks with enough power to deck a guy in one stroke, can be launched by deft spinning of the right analog stick. Add to this more detailed graphics, actual boxing strategy (you can now hug your opponents), and a manager mode, and you have enough innovation for yet another notch in the EA Sports empire.

Fight Night, just like every other EA Sports game, is about more than just having fun—it's also a serious simulation. "I'm not a big soccer fan, but when I play *FIFA*, I actually feel like I can go out and play better soccer afterward," Tsunoda says. This devotion to realism in its chosen subjects is what has made EA such an enormous player, in more ways than one, in its post-*Madden 2001* era. //



BACK TO BASICS

One of *Fight Night 2004*'s most noticeable faults was its out-of-place hip-hop theme—the announcer sounded like Chris Rock on goofballs, and superstars like Erik Morales entered the ring to gangsta rap, which shocked his Mexican fans in real life. Things have been reined in a bit for *Fight Night 2005*. ESPN's Joe Tessitore calls the fights now, and the customizable ring sequences offer a far more varied selection of music, fireworks, and dancing girls.

XRATED

SMART REVIEWS JANUARY 2005

XBOX

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PATRIOT GAMES

Because a little Tom Clancy goes a long way

This is Tom Clancy's Tom Clancy's Xrated introductory text. Or it would be if Tom Clancy would be gracious enough to write it. But, seeing as he's probably writing some novel where the one guy gets involved in international intrigue and then has to call in a satellite-guided missile strike, or calling in a satellite-guided missile strike himself, he is, most probably, too busy to do so. This is what they call in the game business a crying shame.

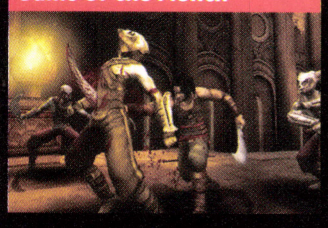
Clancy and his development house, Red Storm, light the Xbox up once more with *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2*, a strategic ground-based war simulator with enough juice to make it one of Xbox Live's most potent online offerings.

And, in the spirit of all things Clancy, titles such as *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within*, the surprisingly dense and fun *Dai Senryaku VII: Modern Military Tactics*, Elctronic Arts' sharp James Bondian shooter GoldenEye: Rogue Agent, and *The Bard's Tale* uphold the famed author's standard of excellence.

Sadly, many offerings this month possess no Clancy-esque characteristics. They are, in fact, the anti-Clancy and probably should be avoided at all costs. It can safely be said, for example, the stillborn import shooter *Muzzle Flash*, has no Tom Clancy in it. Nor does the puddle of rottenness and foul sentiment *Trigger Man* have within it any measure of Clancy.

JANUARY XRATED AWARDS

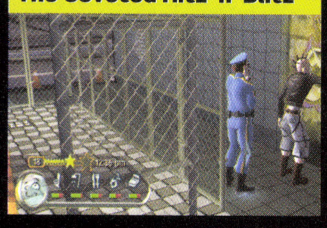
Game of the Month



Prince of Persia: Warrior Within (Ubisoft)

Bring forth hunks of random meat, flagons of the finest liver-reducing ambrosias, 34 maidservants of virtue undetermined because the coronation begins now.

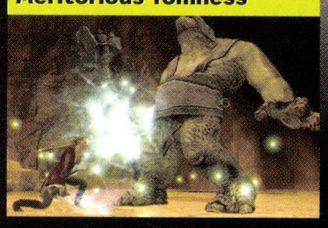
The Coveted Hitz 'n' Blitz



The Urbz: Sims in the City EA

Replacing an "s" with a "z" in your game title is always smart and fresh, as Midway proved with its wacky sports titles all those years ago. Does it look dumb? Who carez?

Meritorious Tomness



The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age (EA)

Tacking on "Tom Clancy's" to any game title is like a license to print money and, perhaps, drive a car made entirely out of dollar bills. Think about it, *Lord of the Rings*!

The Needz Flava Award

Chessmaster Ubisoft

"Would you like to play a nice game of chess?" If *War Games* taught anyone anything, it was that, no, no one wanted to play a nice game of chess. Ever.

LAST MONTH'S HIT OR MISS

Halo 2
Microsoft

Hail to the chief once more. *Halo 2* returns art and excellence to the Xbox and does so with 40 percent more online slaughterings and shootings in the face.

Bad Boys: Miami Takedown (Crave)

Bad boys, the question of the day is not what you gonna do when they come for you but rather, what do you do when your game is stinkier than last week's socks?

MAKING THE GRADE

The score's the thing...

Celebrate greatness. Flush video feces. This is the mandate *Xbox Nation* game reviewers are given and the philosophy its critics operate under. *XBN* strives to be harsh but fair in its scoring; with games costing upward of $50, no one benefits from reviews with padded scores, least of all you.

Breaking down the review scores, you'll find a game with a score of one is Satan's bedchild. Two indicates raw sewage. Three is embarrassing. Four is flawed. Five equals average. Six is all right. Seven is good, eight great. Nine is excellent, and 10 out of 10 is brilliant, and as near to a perfect experience as it's possible to get.

XBOX LIVE

Look for this handy orange box describing a game's Xbox Live content. As always, Xbox Live content will be factored in to achieve a holistic final grade.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

He who would be king

2004 may go down in the annals of videogaming as a year for perfection: Across the board, a slew of sequels—from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* to *Halo 2*—find their developers at the top of their game(s). Bigger, badder, and more beautiful than before, *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* joins this illustrious company with plenty to prove. As the sequel to a critically adored but commercially under-whelming game, this *Warrior* returns to set things straight.

Within gets off to a rollicking start, with especially impressive CG setting the pace; having tampered with time, the Prince is now being pursued by a seemingly unstoppable beast (one of several impressive new foes to fight). As is always the case with time travel, however, not all's as it seems—plot twists aplenty await the patient player.

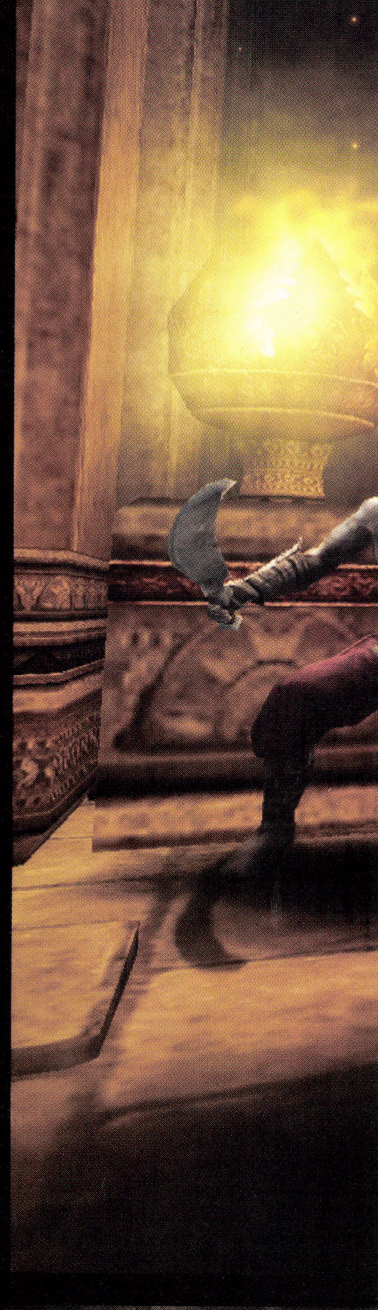
And patience is needed—in spades—in order to make it through this elaborate action-adventure. As with Tecmo's *Ninja Gaiden*, *Within* is less like the "sandbox" games storming shelves these days and more akin to, say, Legos. Seeing how all the pieces snap together is crucial to success.

As before, each environment is a series of lovingly crafted, fantastical yet still believable jewel boxes, each made up of enough narrow precipices, rickety rafters, and rusty deathtraps to keep hearts stopped and would-be kings on their toes. "Puzzles" are extravagant, intricate affairs, each involving leaps of faith, shimmying along spindly beams, and other harrowing feats of athleticism.

Unfortunately, these elaborate set pieces come at a cost: While deftly avoiding death imparts an almost unparalleled visceral thrill, the game hits frequent snags. Daunting in their enormity, many areas require frequent backtracking (temporally or physically) and "seeing" where to go next can prove difficult. While the prince can still rewind time, the inevitable trial-and-error tactics prove frustrating, if not aggravating.

Sadly, the same can be said for combat—a shortcoming of the first game this sequel tries gallantly to correct. The prince's array of attacks has been augmented considerably, and the ability to wield two weapons at once helps, but in the end, the fighting engine has only really been given more depth, not "fixed." Enemy A.I. remains dubious; the prince's attackers don't really get any smarter as the game progresses, just hardier, more plentiful, and—occasionally—kinkier. As before, it's oftentimes more desirable to simply skip conflicts altogether. And as before, the game's autotargeting system can often make this near impossible. Players will love or hate the irony inherent in each time the Prince snarls "I grow tired of this" or "I have more important matters to attend to."

Fortunately, more elaborate design helps to liven up the pacing. Intermittently throughout his quest, the Prince is hounded by the Dahaka—a fearsome foe out to make the monarch meet his fate—forcing him to make the most of his



Once again, the ability to defy gravity—as well as time—makes for awe-inspiring, action-packed moments.

Even the most colossal of foes can be easily toppled when acrobatic agility and time-bending ability are properly mixed and matched.

newfound acrobatic ability during breathless, frantic chases.

Much has been made of *Within*'s grittier (and more marketable) aesthetic, but fans need not fear. The prince's laughable one-liners, the anachronistic new-metal musical stylings, and a newfound emphasis on vivisections—while heavy-handed—don't detract too much from the game's sense of splendor. It's still a breathtakingly beautiful and ornately appointed affair.

Can a sequel—superior in every way—prove a lesser entity than its predecessor? Other franchises have pushed their respective envelopes this year, but *Within* fails to innovate the way its predecessor did just one year ago. At its best, it's nothing short of sheer gaming bliss; shame then that moments of utter, agonizing frustration keep it from being great. Put simply, *Within* fails to fix many of its predecessor *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*'s flaws and foibles. This is a rightful heir, just not resoundingly so. //

David Chen

XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

WATCH THIS!

Live-equipped Princes can test their mettle in time attack and arena combat modes, with scores posted online. But without the benefit of a high-profile event like Tecmo's Master Ninja Tournament, one has to wonder: How long before no one cares anymore?

TRON 2.0: KILLER APP

PUBLISHER: **Buena Vista Interactive** // DEVELOPER: **Climax** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

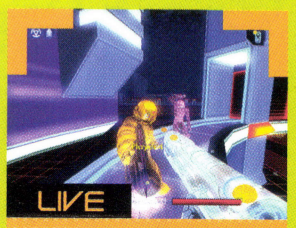
Spinning in Discworld

When it came out on the PC, *Tron 2.0* made surprisingly creative use of its license—sure, you were still shooting guys and finding keys, but the levels were well designed and the "digitized world" device was well integrated into every aspect of the game, including the skill tree (you equip subroutines that can be optimized into beta and gold versions), the setting (various types of computers that Jet, the hero, visits have differing memory capacity), and even the humor (the commanding officer of the virus-elimination team is called Kernel—say it out loud). Even the way combat worked set it apart from the crowd; following in the footsteps of the *Tron* movie, you could only shoot your disc once until it returned to you, but until then you were able to freely control its movement.

Now that it's on Xbox, it's mostly the same game, with all the strengths and weaknesses of the parent title. The texture quality has been noticeably reduced, but the keen glow effect on all the characters and environments is meticulously preserved. The jumping puzzles and lightcycle races, which were the PC game's biggest stumbling blocks, seem a bit more manageable with a gamepad, though the inventory interface probably should have been redesigned a little to make it less slippery for an analog stick. If you didn't or couldn't play the original, *App* isn't quite the same thing, but it's definitely an acceptable substitute. //

Nich Maragos

Prepare to derez the competition.



LIGHT **BRIGHT**

Taking its cue from the *Tron* film, the Game Grid in *Tron 2.0: Killer App* allows players to face off either disc-to-disc or in the lightcycle arena. The lightcycles are skippable—the handling was finicky in the PC game and isn't much better now—but deathmatch is still fun, even if you can't raise your disc in triumph.

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

THE INCREDIBLES

PUBLISHER: **THQ** // DEVELOPER: **Heavy Iron Studios** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **T**

We might be zeroes

There's something fairly incredible about *The Incredibles* videogame, such as the way it omits salient portions of the movie that inspired it. Its central villain, for example, appears in clips taken directly from *The Incredibles* film but does not ever directly menace any of the game's superheroes. And while this seems fairly incredible *prima facie*, it's even more so when taken with the fact developer Heavy Iron Studios chose to create a stage separate from the events of the movie where one superhero, say, races to meet the school bus.

The game offers four metahumans as playable characters, with most of the action centering around the paunchy patriarch of the Parr family, Mr. Incredible, and his rubbery-limbed spouse, Elastigirl. Neither the Elastigirl nor the Incredible sequences pack much punch; they're too similar in nature gameplay-wise, despite the heroes' vastly dissimilar powers. Here, the game focuses too much on punching this to get rid of enemies and pushing that to open doors. Far from super, it is, in fact, pedestrian.

The racing and stealth portions with the Parr's children, Dash and Violent, prove more diverse and fun—especially when the two join for a raucously *Super Monkey Ball*-esque pinball stage. Yet even these challenges fail to shine through; at one point Dash sprints through an obstacle-filled jungle where the paths are difficult to distinguish from the hazards, and the result is graphically impressive but still a restart-laden extravaganza.

Unlike the movie that birthed it, *Incredibles* the game is all pop and fizz, easily beaten and soon forgotten. Worse, there's the sense that the grandiose has just gone average, the superhero equivalent of the Justice League of America battling a jaywalker. //

Greg Orlando

XBN 05 OUT OF TEN

THE URBZ: SIMS IN THE CITY

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **Maxis** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Drecks in the city

The idea behind *The Urbz: Sims in the City*, and it's not a bad one, is to get your Sims out of the house. Since the basic gameplay behind the überpopular franchise is essentially "playing house"—with every possible event, object, and character type that you might find within a household already accounted for—going beyond that into the outside world is a logical direction for the series.

But whereas a house presents such a limited space that it's possible to model its goings-on to a fairly accurate degree, the world is a much more complicated place, and *City* can't possibly do it justice. Apparently realizing this, the creators have simplified everything to the point of inanity. Want to make friends? Perform the actions the game tells you other people find pleasing—those are the ones highlighted in green. Want to make money? *City*'s much-touted ability to perform a Sim's job rather than just send him or her out and wait a while doesn't amount to much; your Sim can do anything from stuff weasels into boxes to create avant-garde sculpture, but you accomplish every single job through the same Simon Says button pressing.

Loose and haphazard graphical effects ensure the game doesn't look as sharp as it should. The framerate constantly drops with no particular cause in view, despite the models and textures being fairly low detail, and the camera controls are far too oversensitive to ever put it just where you want it.

City has its strengths, but ironically enough, they're only what the game inherited from its parent series. Balancing your job and social life with mundane tasks such as cleaning up after yourself and keeping your Sim fed is still compelling, and impressing your friends with a well-decorated apartment turns out to be more interesting than making those friends in the first place. Had it been released as an urban-themed mission pack to *The Sims* or *The Sims 2*, the new content might have been better received than this attempt at taking your Sims into a place they were never really meant to go. //

Nich Maragos

XBN 05
OUT OF TEN

Please, hammer, don't hurt 'em!

CHANGE CLOTHES

The most successful of the additions to the familiar *Sims* gameplay is the ability to buy and wear new clothes. Different cultures around the city will expect you to dress differently if you want to earn a good reputation on their turf, which will teach gamers around the country a valuable lesson: Despite what you have seen in the movies, you cannot toss on whatever you feel like and expect to be judged "by what's inside."

GODZILLA: SAVE THE EARTH

PUBLISHER: **Atari** // DEVELOPER: **Pipeworks** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

The nuclear-irradiated monster mash

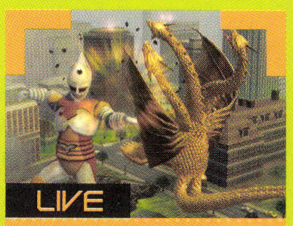
For a licensed four-player brawler about a bunch of beasts, *Godzilla: Save the Earth* is a more than competent animal. The creatures all look like their rubber-suited counterparts, and the various locations, from Boston to Monster Island, are all well represented. The gameplay setup isn't too shabby, either; each combatant has a couple attacks, a rarely used block, and unique special attacks. There are plenty of modes, including your typical story, versus, and melee choices, as well as some generally weak challenges involving monsters shooting down UFOs and chucking rocks at enemies, among other tasks.

It's the brawling gameplay dragging things down. While it's fun to knock Mothra out of the sky with Godzilla's atomic breath or chuck an ocean liner into Moguera's maw (there are 18 monsters in all), it's a short-lived thrill. The game's slow pace—understandable given the combatants—keeps the intensity in check, and after the novelty wears off, everything becomes a tedious button-mashing routine, as aside from the challenges, all the modes just have you laying the smackdown on another monster or three.

While there are plenty of unlockables to string along fanboys, it takes a long time to earn the points to open them, as you must go through the bland story mode repeatedly. Gamers who feel the need to celebrate Godzilla's 50th by dropping 50 bucks and those who like mindless brawlers can mine some fun outta *Earth*. Others should let sleeping monsters rest. //

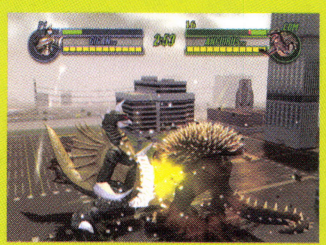
Greg Ford

Unlock Jet Jaguar for fun and profit.



WAKE **ME UP!**

Test matches over Xbox Live ran smoothly, although the game moves slowly to begin with, it would be hard to tell if they didn't. Regardless, online play is a boost for *Godzilla: Save the Earth*, as it allows for up to four players and offers versus, free for all, team battle, destruction, and team destruction matches.



XBN 06 OUT OF TEN

DAI SENRYAKU VII: MODERN MILITARY TACTICS

PUBLISHER: **Kemco** // DEVELOPER: **SystemSoft Alpha** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

These unadvanced wars...

Impossibly dense as it may seem, *Dai Senryaku VII: Modern Military Tactics* is at heart nothing more than a deeper and more robust version of Nintendo's Game Boy Advance cult classic *Advance Wars*—sans the goofy anime characters.

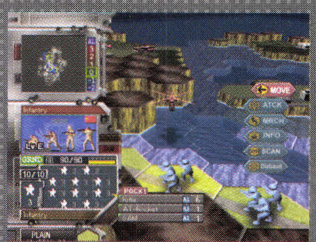
Enter a humorless and fictitious world where the global superpowers are locked in a battle for supremacy. As commander of the Blue army in *Tactics*' single-player campaign, you lead your nation to victory by utilizing modern warfare machinery from a variety of real-world countries.

Through a meticulous turn-based process, you attack enemy units and seize key cities, factories, airports, and seaports for domination of a map. Much like in Nintendo's handheld *Wars* series, goals and conditions for victory in single-player missions are predefined. Multiplayer is possible through *Tactics*' "free play" mode, in which up to four generals vie for control of a hex-filled map. Thick layers of comparative number-crunching strategy top off this incredibly complex war game.

Although it's practically a miracle *Tactics* saw release in the United States, due to its cultural obscurity and genre, you can't help but feel both Kemco and SystemSoft did the bare minimum required to ship a game with this kind of scope and niche appeal. Visually, it recalls the graphical prowess of a Super Nintendo title, while the game's total lack of system link and Xbox Live multiplayer flies in the face of Xbox doctrine.

As an unapologetic throwback to the hardcore days of tabletop turn-based strategy gaming, *Tactics* certainly isn't everyone's cup of tea. But if genre classics like *Military Madness* (TurboGrafx-16), *Iron Storm* (Sega Saturn), and the Game Boy's *Wars* fuel a lighthouse in your soul, then—by all means—enlist for duty. //

Che Chou



XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR

PUBLISHER: **Activision** // DEVELOPER: **Spark Unlimited** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

No medals necessary

"This isn't about medals or honor," Sgt. Chuck Walker, one of *Call of Duty: Finest Hour*'s several playable characters says. "This is about winning the war." With such an obvious stab at the competition, you have to wonder if Activision is declaring a war of its own on Electronic Arts' generally excellent (yet somewhat tainted after *Rising Sun*) *Medal of Honor* series. If nothing else, *Hour* proves *Call of Duty*'s success on PC was no fluke. But then again, don't go expecting any Game of the Year nods for this incarnation.

Although *Hour* and last year's Duty for PC are totally independent of one another (aside from a shared setting in Stalingrad ripped straight out of *Enemy at the Gates*), the philosophies behind each game—namely, key factors distinguishing *Duty* from *Honor*—remain intact. You're not just one guy who single-handedly wins key WWII battles; rather, you control several characters who follow orders and work with teammates to do so. It feels a bit more realistic.

But only a bit more. *Hour* is yet another bloodless war game where being near death (after taking about six shots from a machine gun, no less) fails to slow a character down—understandable for gameplay's sake, but still off-putting when realism serves as a selling point. Perhaps that's all for the best, though, as missions such as Depot Saboteurs in North Africa not only prove extremely difficult, but also add hours of repeated tasks due to checkpoints spread more than 10 minutes apart. Meanwhile, inconsistent A.I. works well one minute but almost comically the next. Sgt. Dehart may celebrate your having saved him by repeatedly running in circles or straight into a wall.

Thankfully, the shoddy A.I. and other flaws are rare or negligible enough so as not to detract from the overall enjoyment of an otherwise great game. *Hour* stands out the most in its mission diversity. Primarily a first-person shooter, the game quite agreeably changes pace with levels focused on driving tanks, gunning from a high-speed jeep, fast-paced sniping, or other breaks from the norm.

Excellent production values further enhance the experience, from visceral orchestral music to spot-on surround sound serving as a reminder someone from the Axis powers is always gunning for you. And Xbox Live support adds considerable value.

It's all enough to make what isn't necessarily Xbox's finest hour into, at the very least, a dozen or so mostly enjoyable ones. //

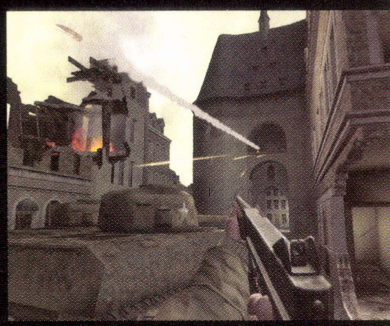
Chris Baker

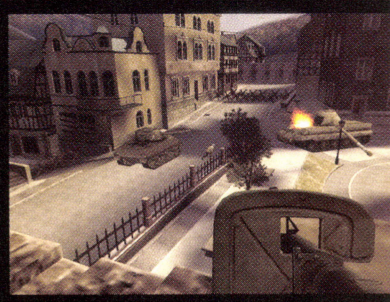
XBN 08
OUT OF TEN

FINEST **HOURS**

Call of Duty: Finest Hour's Xbox Live support doesn't revolutionize online play, but from trenches to sniper-friendly isolated windows, excellent level design complements beautiful, sometimes haunting scenery for some decidedly above-average deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture-the-flag bouts. Search and destroy missions offer the most originality, as one side attacks in an attempt to blow up designated enemy locations and the other fervently defends its terrain.

Reduce the Nazi threat with heavy (is there any other kind?) artillery.





FIGHT CLUB

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** // DEVELOPER: **Genuine Games** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

First rule of fight club: Don't bother

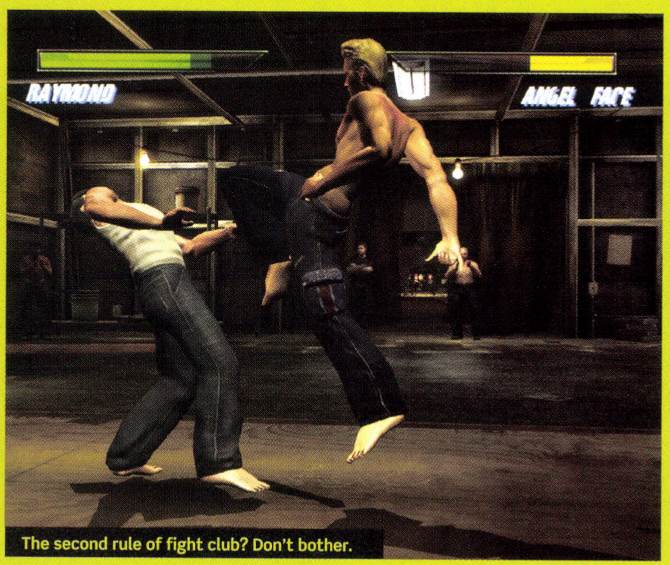
Chuck Palahniuk is probably chuckling, seeing that his anticonsumerist-message-laced novel has spawned both a memorable 1999 film and now a lackluster videogame.

Fight Club's "story" mode centers on some suicidal schmuck who goes on a brawl-filled quest to find Tyler Durden. Along the way, he fights random nefarious blue-collar folk like "Irvin" and "Mechanic," along with movie characters like Meat Loaf's Bob and Jared Leto's Angel Face (note that even these minor characters lack the likenesses of their original actors, so don't look for a digital Ed Norton or Brad Pitt, either).

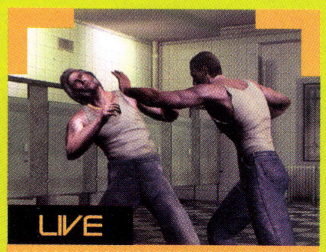
The protagonist can choose from a whopping three fighting styles, and he uses the limited moveset of each style in single-round bouts that always end in X-rayed bone-breaking (oddly enough, a visual aesthetic stolen from the wrong movie, *Romeo Must Die* in this case). Besides the story mode, there's also a traditional arcade option (fights without the nonmoving cut-scenes), as well as survival, training, and versus modes.

The character models are barely passable, the "cut-scenes" are actually slide shows, the moves are limited, and fighting tactics are barely present (liberal head-butting and grapples win the day). The overall game lacks replay value due to a short story mode, scant unlockable characters (including more random movie characters and some odd choices such as Fred Durst and Abraham Lincoln), and other playable characters that look too similar to each other to really care about. To be fair, the backgrounds look pretty—which is faint praise indeed, and the game only gets credit for answering the preposterous question no one bothered asking: Can Durst take Lincoln in a fight? //

Thierry Nguyen

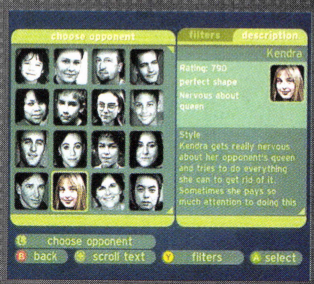


The second rule of fight club? Don't bother.



CLUB MED(ICAL)?

If you play *Fight Club* in hardcore mode on Xbox Live, start worrying about your bones getting broken—you'll have to spend character points—won after each successful brawl—treating said broken bones between matches.



CHESSMASTER

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

Queen to queen's level...zzz...

A quick look at *Chessmaster*'s box might cause consternation: "Hey, that creepy old chess dude/mascot guy is missing!" you'll say. "His very presence has ensured quality chess for almost 20 years. What now?" No worries. His creepy old chess spirit pervades this simple yet effective videogame rendition of the greatest board game ever.

While you can easily imagine a better-looking chess game that, you know, actually *takes advantage* of the Xbox's processing power, a better teacher is tough to find. Real-life champions such as Josh Waitzkin (the kid in *Searching for Bobby Fischer*) offer extremely helpful tutorials—*hours*' worth—explaining everything from a pawn's movement to advanced skewering maneuvers. An in-game Blunder Alert also presents better alternatives to your latest screwup, and you can take things online, too, with your Xbox Live account (if playing for free on sites like Yahoo Games isn't your bag).

If you're really serious about improving your game, you can watch 800-plus move-by-move re-creations of famous matches from the last 400 years. Yep, this even includes that whole series in which Gary Kasparov got his butt kicked by that smarmy IBM computer Deep Blue, along with commentary geared toward hardcore chess enthusiasts, as illustrated by these attitude-packed words from Round 6: "[Kasparov] played the opening slowly, spending two minutes on the risky 7...h6?!" Ha! What a freakin' moron!

If *Chessmaster* upped its production values, it might be worth a look to casual chess players who just want to get a game in here and there. As it stands, though, only actual aspiring creepy old chess dudes need bother. //

Chris Baker

XBN 03 OUT OF TEN

XBN 05 OUT OF TEN

BLINX 2: MASTERS OF TIME & SPACE

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **Artoon** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **E**

One cat you won't have allergic reactions to

For a genre that was declared dead two years ago, platformers still occupy a huge chunk of shelf space...on the PlayStation 2, anyway. For the Xbox, the situation is far bleaker, and no game symbolizes this more than *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*, which was supposed to take Japan by storm but instead found a home in bargain bins on both sides of the Pacific. That's why it's refreshing to see the developers at Artoon take a back-to-basics approach with their feline-oriented sequel. Instead of trying to revolutionize console games, *Blinx 2: Masters of Time & Space* is simply an unassuming, solid, and well-executed platformer.

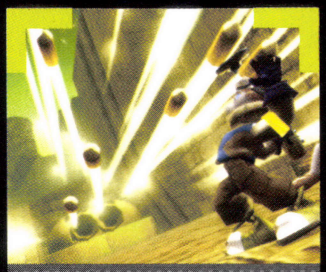
Even though this game's called *Blinx 2*, you don't actually control the cutesy orange-and-white bugger Blinx much—instead, play alternates between Time Sweeper squads and the piglike Tom Tom Gang, both chasing after pieces of a galaxy-rending time crystal. As with the original, the cats control time, "pausing" the world to freeze up rivers and "rewinding" giant plants back into tiny seedlings. The thieving pigs wield heavy-duty weaponry and Bugs Bunny-like portable holes, useful for warping out of danger and sending hapless Time Sweepers to an alternate dimension.

Unlike the first *Blinx*, which mostly succeeded in annoying the snot out of players, *Space* cleverly uses this gimmickry to expand on its standard hop-n-bop core. There's no time limit in this game, and most of the arbitrary restraints on your skill set have been removed, letting you concentrate instead on the addictive business of solving puzzles and playing around with the time/space controls. The puzzles are devious without being unfair, and there's just enough off-kilter Japanese humor to keep you motivated. Things never get too tricky (there are hints every step of the way), but the puzzles are engaging, and they eliminate the monotony nearly every platformer falls into after two or three hours.

Although the Time Sweeper missions are smartly designed, the Tom Tom bits aren't quite as smooth—they involve lots of stealth and require a trial-and-error process that will leave you comparatively cold. As a whole, though, the game is remarkably polished, conjuring up memories of an age when Japan was king of videogames and it was actually fun to collect coins. To put it another way, *Space* (despite its relatively tiny length and low difficulty level) serves as a reminder games don't have to be epic to be engaging. //

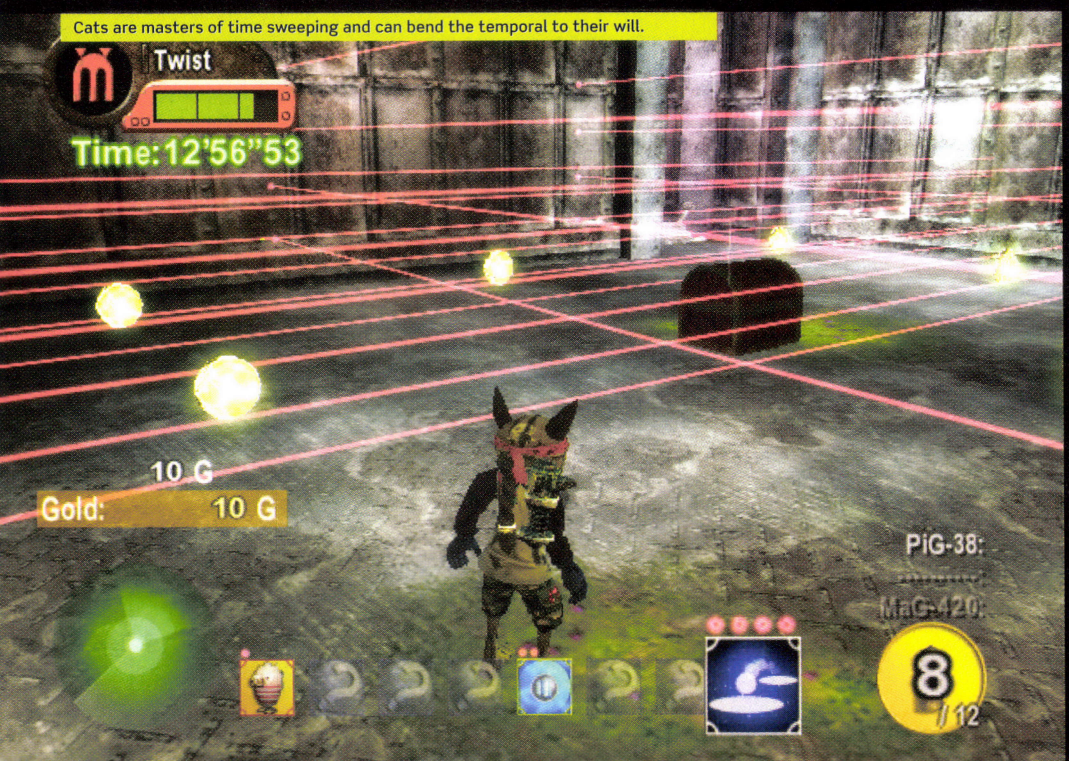
Kevin Gifford

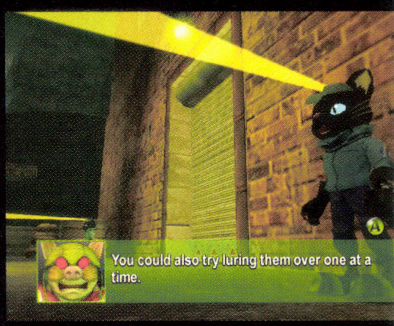
XBN 07 OUT OF TEN



INTERNET? EVER HEARD OF IT?

Blinx 2: Masters of Time & Space has a pretty extensive multiplayer mode, rivaled in its genre only by *Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal* on the PlayStation 2. You can create clans, complete with customized emblems, uniforms, and fur colors, and battle with three other teams in large, spacious arenas filled with weapons and camping points. The only snag: You can't play online. Sort of defeats the purpose, doesn't it?





NCAA MARCH MADNESS 2005 // ESPN COLLEGE HOOPS 2005

NCAA MARCH MADNESS 2005

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **E**

Calling the shots for Xbox college basketball

The ability to call offensive and defensive alignments at will is one of *March Madness*' greatest features.

Simply by the nature of the how-cool-is-this business in which it deals, EA Sports surely felt the need to add gimmicks to its latest college basketball offering, *NCAA March Madness 2005*. That's why, for no apparent reason, one can adjust the cheek puffiness of his players or decide whether the third-string forward for Idaho State would rather have a mustache or goatee.

All this is silly, of course, because even without an excess of gadgets and doodads, *Madness 2005* is a wonderful videogame and, sans question, one of the best hoops offerings of the season.

It's all about control, and Madness *2005* offers plenty of it. Sure, the graphics might be half a step below Sega's so-so *College Hoops 2K5*'s. And sure, Dick Vitale's bellowing nonsense will drive you to drink. But here you get to truly know what it feels like to run the point guard position for a Division I basketball team. Pull up at half court, and with a few button-presses, you can flow a motion offense, set up an iso play for the small forward, alley-oop to the center, or bounce-pass down low to your posting-up power forward. It's pure authenticity, and things get even better on the defensive end. Here, nothing is more fun than pressing the opposing players for the entire game, then adding an in-your-face double team to the overmatched rival point guard. It's vintage University of Cincinnati, circa 1992, and you can all but smell the sweat of a beaten-down rival.

The scent? Victory. //

Jeff Pearlman

XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

TROPHY **LIFE**

Yes, you're going to get all the madness you want on Xbox Live this year, complete with the same suite of features seen in all the EA sports titles. This includes special lobbies for players with elite reputation ratings and holiday tournaments with special limited-edition trophies for the winners.

ESPN COLLEGE HOOPS 2005

PUBLISHER: **Sega** // DEVELOPER: **Visual Concepts** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

Breakaway *Hoops*

HOOP **DREAMS**

Take *ESPN College Hoops 2005* online and you'll have the ability to start leagues, as well as message other *ESPN* loyalists around the nation. There will also be downloadable rosters, and when you get tired of whupping everybody's butt, check out the leaderboards to see where you're ranked in the *ESPN* universe.

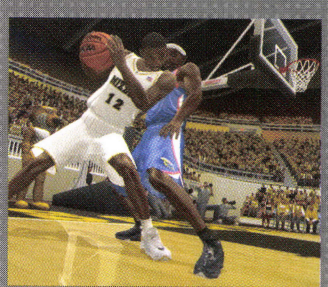
Here is the best thing about *ESPN College Hoops 2005*: You can be yourself. Or Malik Yoba. Or Vanilla Ice. Or Herve Villechaize.

Thanks to some very clever programming, *Hoops 2005* allows you to clone anyone with Dolly-like accuracy (baaaah). After choosing create a player and thinking up a name (say, Woodrow Wilson), it's possible to pick from seven heads, six skin colors, two muscle tones, seven builds, 14 hairstyles, four hair colors, six beard styles, six mustaches, and three sideburns. There are six right-neck tattoos, six left-neck tattoos, 12 shoulder tattoos, 12 bicep tattoos, 12 forearm tattoos, eight styles of sunglasses, 12 armbands, four elbow pads, eight wristbands, and 16 kneepads. Has a college player ever worn sunglasses during a game? Does it matter?

By this point in post-TI-99/4A videogame history, the veteran participant understands clever little bells and whistles (such as, umm, sunglasses and neck tattoos) are often a way to disguise a game's deficiencies and/or blandness.

This is not a bad game by any means, but save for the doodads, there's nothing really new here of note. Yeah, you can run a bunch of offenses, and selecting fast break results in some pretty cool rim-rattling dunks. But despite slightly better graphics, there's something about *Hoops 2005*'s gameplay that lags behind its main rival, EA Sports' *NCAA March Madness 2005*. The sweat-while-you-play intensity just isn't there—even when your point guard is Bob Hope. //

Jeff Pearlman



XBN 06 OUT OF TEN

MUZZLE FLASH

PUBLISHER: **JVC** // DEVELOPER: **Victor Interactive** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$29.99** // ESRB: **E**

Muzzle or choke chain this bad puppy

Welcome to the world of *Muzzle Flash*, a magical place where bullets pierce walls, ricochet off bricks, and can be fired from a machine gun more accurately than from a sniper rifle.

Once poised as a killer app for Xbox in Japan, *Flash* promised action the way Japanese gamers prefer it—in the third-person perspective. With a *Metal Gear Solid*-inspired story and online skirmishes over Xbox Live, JVC dreamed of having a *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs*-sized hit on its hands, one developed in Japan no less.

By all measures, *Flash* is a disaster. PlayStation-caliber graphics, junktastic A.I., and bug-ridden gameplay plague this instant bargain-bin title that looks more like a computer science major's senior project than an officially licensed Xbox game.

In *Flash*, you take control of Leon Spencer, a Milquetoast bad dude who must single-handedly annihilate hundreds of (presumably) South American terrorists. The gameplay is simple—shoot, kill, reload, repeat. *Flash* differentiates itself from most run-and-gun games by the sheer number of enemies littering each of its stages. In the fifth and final mission, players must mow down no fewer than 50 people.

As an obvious ploy to lengthen a chronically short game, *Flash* throws up impossible odds in each mission as psychic enemies who possess the ability to shoot Spencer no matter what stands in the way converge on his position. Only a near-perfect run will enable him to clear each mission, and that requires a cocktail of luck and memorization of each psychic soldier's location.

The only fun to be had with *Flash* rests with its campy dialogue and in watching opponents kill themselves and other comrades with ricocheting bullets. But jesting a failure this big is akin to making fun of the slow kid at school. *Flash* is an unfinished game that either needed another year of development or a merciful early termination. //

Ryan Payton

Despite its flaws, *Muzzle Flash* does have muzzle flash.

XBN 02 OUT OF TEN

TRIGGER MAN

PUBLISHER: **Crave** // DEVELOPER: **Point of View** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **T**

Can't find a better man

The Mafia genre has had its ups and downs. For every *Godfather*, there are about 100 abysmal mobster flicks bringing the genre down into the muck. The same holds true for videogames; for every *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, there exist about 20 D-list titles like *Trigger Man*.

In *Man*, you assume the title role, a Mafia upstart whose sole purpose is to put bullets (and knives) into whichever soul their boss' finger is pointing at. In theory, this sounds entertaining, but the title's myriad fun-killing issues should make most people wish they could turn the guns on themselves.

The knife-throwing feature (for a *trigger* man) breaks into a Sam Raimi-ish "knife cam" that only sometimes kills, no matter how good the throw is. The graphics are brown and, well, brown, with no environmental interactivity. The enemy A.I. goons perform as if they're all deaf, running directly into your line of fire (or the walls), and the character animation is on par with the old *Mr. Bill* claymation shorts. None of the fallen weaponry is usable, so backtracking to ammo dumps becomes the game's great Herculean labor.

If you were to turn the volume off and make spitty gunshot noises with his mouth, he'd be creating a more aurally pleasing sound environment. The music consists of Muzak-sounding pieces...when it decides it's actually going to play and not crash.

Trigger Man's main accomplishment seems to be actually getting to market where poor saps can waste hard-earned money on it. Stop the madness. Do not, under any circumstances, pull the trigger, man. //

Russell Garbutt

Use the knife, Trigger Man!

XBN 02 OUT OF TEN

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON 2

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON 2

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Red Storm** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

In which Casper gets popped for peeking out

In the grand scheme of Tom Clancy's Xbox legacy, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2* represents the series' final tactical hurrah on this current generation of hardware. The game's gorgeous textures, detailed character models, and subtle lighting effects speak to all the hard work that's gone into making this sequel a poster child for visual excess. Likewise, after the success of Ubisoft's snappy *Rainbow Six* series on Xbox, the user interface has also been revamped to give *Recon 2* a more immediate feel. Instead of being bogged down with waypoint markers on a big overhead map, you now point your reticule and bellow commands like "Move out!" to your teammates at the press of a button.

But if this game is the technological pinnacle of military shooters on Xbox, then all of the above improvements are par for the course. The real question is, has Red Storm approached the pseudorealistic shooter—a genre it practically created—with a critical eye for evolution? Sadly, what is easily one of the best-looking and most aurally pleasing shooters of 2004 has the unambitious soul of its outdated predecessor—at least when it comes to its single-player campaign.

For a war game trying to emulate the chaos of a battlefield, *Recon 2* lacks the one essential element for success: intelligent A.I. for both enemies and friendlies. As with other Clancy-branded console shooters, your enemies here aren't so much brainy as they are obedient. They shoot back when under fire and come storming out of their hiding spots when you trigger an invisible wire; when you reload from your last save point, enemies react to your approach in exactly the same way every time. Similarly, be prepared to play baby-sitter for three bumbling squadmates.

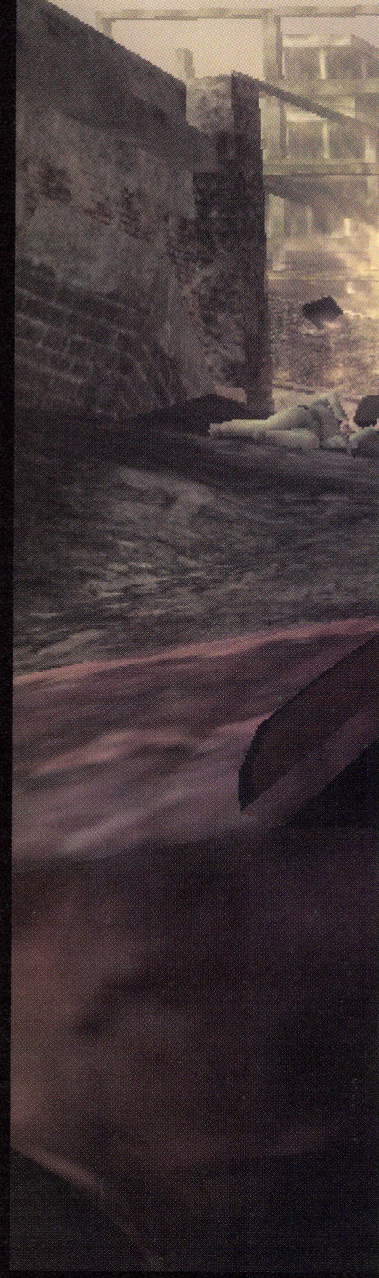
Thankfully, there's Xbox Live to save the day. While single player hardly amounts to anything more than a picnic in a very scenic shooting gallery, the game shines online. Its newly implemented third-person view gives the action much-needed scale and perspective, while Red Storm continues to polish the multiplayer experience with a tight batch of maps. For better or worse, the wide assortment of weapons and huge outdoor maps reward those who camp and snipe. It makes for a slower, more paranoid experience, although the deliberate pace certainly isn't everyone's cup of tea.

As the (likely) final *Ghost Recon* title this generation, this sequel closes its single-player chapter with a whimper. Regardless, the game garners a seven here based purely on its shared Xbox Live experience. Offline, this is a cardboard shooting gallery. Online, it's an entirely different beast. //

Che Chou

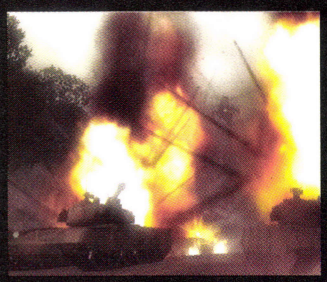
XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

Ideally, four-player splitscreen isn't how you'd want to play *Ghost Recon 2* multiplayer.



Congregating around your friends is good when making s'mores, but not so good when the grenades fly in.

Commando Mitchell knows the chant: "This is my rifle—this is my gun. This is for fighting—this is for fun."



LONE WOLF AND GUN

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2's quick solo missions include a lone wolf mode where you tackle campaign maps without the help of your squad (honestly, it's no big loss.) Instead, you're strapped to the teeth with the latest Uncle Sam can afford—including the futuristic M29 assault rifle, which allows you to lay down indirect fire using a gun camera, target designator, and airburst grenades. A new rifle and the chance to play without the hassle of baby-sitting your brain-dead squadmates? Hoo-ah!

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**

Electronic Arts spins its first (Final) Fantasy

The ones most likely to be let down by *The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age*—Electronic Arts' first big foray into console RPGs—are, well, RPG fans themselves. Too tightly fettered to its licenser, *Age* joins *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron* and *Enter the Matrix* as the latest in an uneven line of high-profile—but underwhelming—tie-ins. Like the inevitable amusement park ride, *Age* reflects a wealth of talent and resources; but as a game, it's safe and absolutely unambitious.

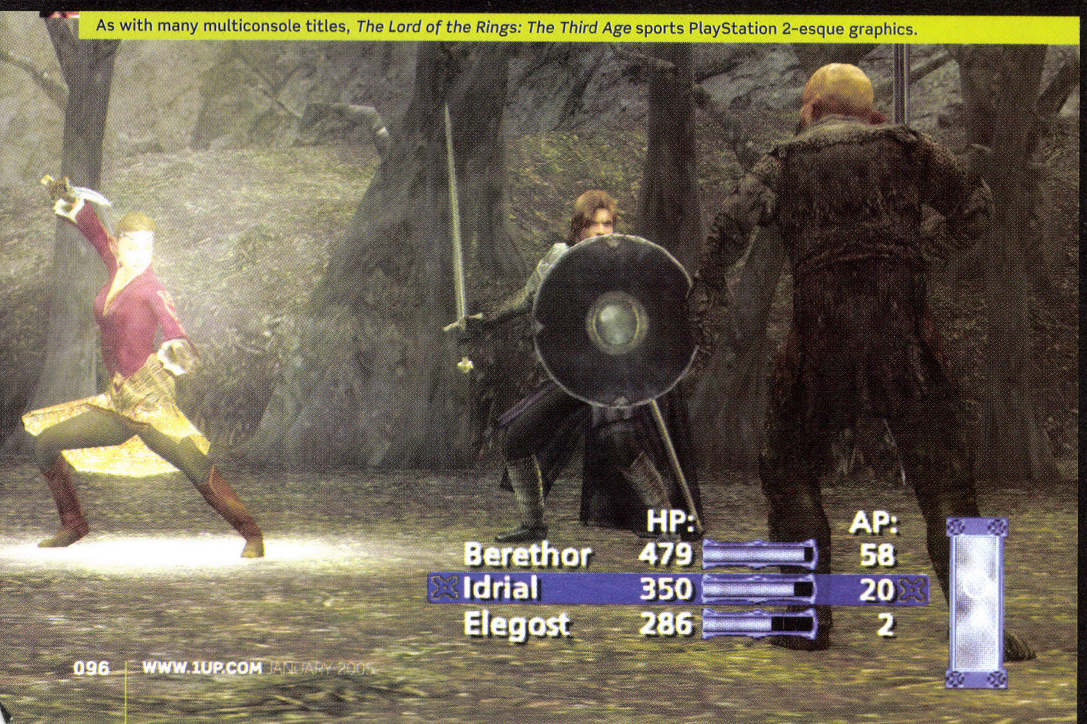
In the pedestrian sense, *Age* does the job just fine, with plenty of stats to balance and abilities to acquire. Those new to the genre will appreciate its user-friendly approach to a familiar formula: Explore before engaging in combat three abreast, mixing up magic, melee, missiles, and eventually, more complex stratagems. Ultimately, though, it's a frills-free rehash of older—and superior—games.

Quest goals are arbitrarily applied, side quests are simplistic and implied, minigames or similar diversions from all the slashing and spellcasting are nonexistent. Character customization is almost entirely additive; rarely is the best option for gearing up any less than obvious. Similarly, experience points and new, more powerful gear come far too frequently—more nuisance than welcome reward.

Predictably, enemies are almost entirely limited to bigger and badder variants on familiar faces. Even the most fearsome of the film fellowship's foes lose their majesty—any fan of the films will easily predict who and what will show up when. Which isn't to say the many races and places of Peter Jackson's Middle-earth aren't accurately—and admirably—represented. The most attention has been lavished on such blockbuster beasties as the balrog, ents, and nazgul, and it shows. The environments, especially, capture the look, feel, and scale of the movie's set pieces to a T, although some lack the minutiae that really bring worlds to life.

But behind the polygons, particle effects, and gratuitous cameo appearances lies an RPG engine with a sound but derivative system that genre fans will find tried, true, and a little bit impressive. As an Xbox RPG, the stakes are even higher. The few role-playing options already available on Xbox are as innovative, good-looking, and memorable as those any console has to offer. *Age* pales when held up against the evolutionary gameplay and moral urgency of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* or *Fable*—not to mention the variety and visual splendor of any recent *Final Fantasy* game.

Throughout the game, players contend at every turn with repeated reminders (in the form of repurposed movie clips) that each in-game scenario has a cinematic correspondent. Interacting with Aragorn, Legolas, and others finds their lines from the film spliced and shoehorned into awkward, new, and needless dialogues with the player's



As with many multiconsole titles, *The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age* sports PlayStation 2-esque graphics.

■ Co-op "mode" is a nonfactor, the equivalent of passing the controller back and forth with a friend.

Packed with plenty of special effects to enliven the events onscreen, *The Third Age* looks quite good-for a PlayStation 2 game.

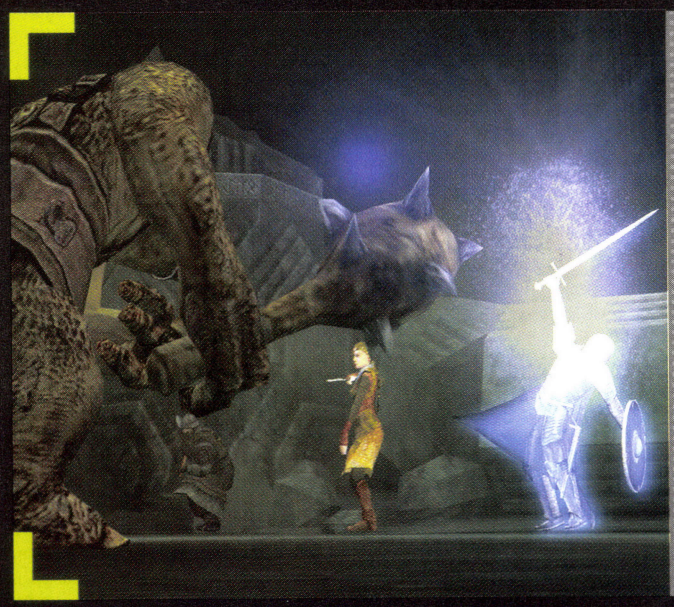
party, and the games' heroes spout out, word for word, much of the movies' most memorable dialogue upon reaching key locales.

And while the in-game voice casting is quite good, any palpable sense of emotion, conflict, or drama—the things that make up a good story—is lacking. But the most egregious shortcoming is that so much of the content, including scenarios, sounds, set pieces, and the story (flimsily intertwined with the plot of the films), reflects a world limited solely to the 558 minutes filmgoers have come to know as *Rings* canon—no more, no less. Simply put, *Age* suffers from a shortage of any sense of mystery.

As an (almost absolutely) literal re-creation of the films' rich sense of splendor, *Age* nails its mark. And so it should: Merging the world's most popular fantasy game series with the world's most popular fantasy film series is about as safe as bets come. Nonetheless, Xbox owners should expect more. //

David Chen

XBN 06 OUT OF TEN



IT'S BAD TO BE THE BAD GUY

Far from being fully fleshed out, *The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age*'s evil mode feels like nothing more than the leftover remnants of a more ambitious plan. Completion of each in-game level enables players to revisit past conflicts with orcs, goblins, wargs, and even the balrog at their command, with special items as the trophy. Sadly, it's impossible to pick and choose teams or places, leaving the player to wage the same brief, easy, and uncompelling battles ad nauseam.

SONIC MEGA COLLECTION PLUS

PUBLISHER: **Sega** // DEVELOPER: **Sonic Team** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

Azure skies for the blue bomber

The Xbox never found its platforming mascot. Blinx the vacuuming cat more or less sucked, Voodoo Vince's masochism was hardly endearing, and nobody wants to see the ugly mugs of *Whacked!* or *Kung Fu Chaos* characters again. It's no big loss, really; cutesy platforming characters matter less and less as games and gamers, grow up. It wasn't always like this, though: *Sonic Mega Collection* kicks some history on to the Xbox, returning to the height of the mascot era—the Mario versus Sonic conflict of 1991. Sega's sassy blue hedgehog was the first real competition Nintendo's ubiquitous plumber ever faced, and replaying these classics reveals just how he did it.

Playing the original Sega Genesis *Sonic the Hedgehog* feels a bit limiting, as Sonic can't do much beyond run, jump, and spin, but his trademark speed still impresses, and more importantly, the game still looks beautiful. Searing colors, art-deco backdrops, and creative level designs combine to give the game a real sense of aesthetics...something Mario titles didn't even begin to tackle until much later. Sonic didn't win with gameplay; he won with style. *Sonic 2*, *Sonic 3*, and *Sonic & Knuckles* offer a more complete package—classy visuals, tighter control, and an arsenal of cool moves for their characters. You'll spend the majority of your time with these top-notch titles. A few of the unlockable non-Sonic games (developed by the same core team) also impress: *Ristar* and *Comix Zone* are two of the neatest Genesis games you've probably never played.

Collection delivers the goods, but discriminating Sonic aficionados are better off with the superior two-year-old GameCube version: None of the games runs in full-screen mode on Xbox, while the GC versions are identical to the 16-bit originals. //
Shane Bettenhausen

Here's a memory to "block" out! Hah!

BETWEEN GEARS

The Xbox version of *Sonic Mega Collection* offers six Sonic Game Gear titles, but they're nigh unplayable—these games were never meant to be played on a screen this big. Just attempt to play the execrable *Sonic Blast* without Dramamine...

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

THE BARD'S TALE

PUBLISHER: **InXile Entertainment** // DEVELOPER: **InXile Entertainment** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Sing us a song, you're the lute man...

Bards are easily the losers of fantasy gaming. Everyone wants to be the sword guy, the bow guy, or even the healing guy. But the music guy? Forget it. Yet somehow, not only did Brian Fargo help develop the RPG genre with *The Bard's Tale* back in freakin' 1986, he also managed to make the Bard one of the cooler RPG heroes to date in this new, modernized, meta-aware update.

This new *Tale* is another action hack-n-slash à la *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, but while it brings a few modest improvements to gameplay, it brings a better helping of content. For example, any items that aren't better than what you currently have are instantly converted to money, which saves a trip—no lugging yourself back to town to sell random loot. Instead of a traditional party, the Bard summons creatures and persons to help him out (a particular favorite is the cantankerous old man who serves as your sacrificial trap-finder)—unfortunately, you don't have direct control over them, and their A.I. can be a bit flaky at times.

Tale realizes it's pretty much a standard fantasy hack-n-slash, and as a result, it revels in self-parody. Besides the Bard and the Narrator arguing back and forth about the Bard's quests, his reactions to game characters, and why slain animals expel plate mail upon death, *Tale* is filled with musical numbers, scenes of zombies dancing, and the best endgame decision since *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Its self-conscious metacomedy helps elevate what is already a solid game into a sing-songily fine game. //
Thierry Nguyen

XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

SCALER

PUBLISHER: **Global Star** // DEVELOPER: **A2M** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

Speaking in (forked) tongues

See Bobby run. See Bobby turn into weird blue lizard. See Bobby jump. This fairly well sums up the entire game that is *Scaler*, A2M's foray into the already overcrowded platformer market. Through the game's 10 levels, you will control the shape-shifting Bobby Jenkins, a Willy Beamish-type kid who gets zapped into a lizard dimension in order to bring down a tyrant bent on dominating the universe. Two levels into *Scaler*, you'll realize just because you're the Lizard King, it doesn't mean you can do much of anything with it.

Scaler does possess a visual beauty of sorts, with the type of graphical presentation reminiscent of *Beyond Good & Evil*—had that title's graphical budget been cut in half. The animations are smooth and accurate, and the environments are teeming with organic life. Gameplay moves include riding vines, jumping (single and double), simple attacks, and item collecting. Collected items can be used to purchase attack upgrades and increased health efficacy. Jenkins' two main attacks consist of tongue lashing and claw swiping, and upon defeating a certain number of any one species, he can morph into other creatures. Each transformation comes with its own invaluable feature set, such as the ability to roll into a ball and bowl down anyone in your way.

Scaler is by no means a bad game, it just seems to be content to wallow in mediocrity. Its $20 price tag may be attractive to some, and its appeal may be right on target for the youngest of audiences that don't know the difference between an A- and C-list title. Taking into account all of the other choices available, Xbox owners would be hard-pressed to come up with a reason, other than the financial, to spend valuable gaming time with the little lizard that could. // **Russell Garbutt**

Can Scaler make it to Castle Greyskull?

CRASH 'N' BURN

PUBLISHER: **Eidos** // DEVELOPER: **Climax Brighton** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **T**

Multifaceted play lets you crash *and* burn

THE BOMB (TAG)

Crash 'N' Burn oddly features no splitscreen multiplayer, but Xbox Live support enables you to join 15 others in a nice variety of race types. Beyond normal races and the kamikaze mode, there's also running man (imagine tag, only you want to be "it"), bomb tag (traditional tag), and last man standing (a demolition derby). And then there's assassination, a chesslike mode in which two teams of eight aim to destroy the opponent's "king" car.

Just a few months ago, *Burnout 3: Takedown* set the benchmark for high-speed, crash-heavy racing. That's a truly great thing for gamers, but not so great for *Crash 'N' Burn*. Compared to the spiffy new model that is *Takedown*, it doesn't even deserve to be on the showroom floor.

You're not going to get a much plainer-looking Xbox game than *Burn*. Although you can fully customize your vehicle, it really has no personality whatsoever, and the car models look quite pathetic when compared to those in *Takedown*, *Project Gotham Racing*, or pretty much any other Xbox racing franchise. Beyond that, even the most breakneck speeds achieved in *Burn* feel like a Sunday drive in *Takedown*.

If you can get past the slower pace and blander appearance, though, you might find a few things to like under *Burn*'s hood. The short, self-intersecting tracks (a figure eight, for example) ensure only a few of the 16 cars that begin a race will survive without, well, crashing 'n' burning. This holds especially true in the game's coolest racing mode, kamikaze, which features eight racers going one way as the others head in the opposite direction—serious head-on collisions ensue. Wreckage stays on the track, too—even oil slicks and masses of fire—so every race feels different.

So yes, *Burn* has some cool ideas. If only you didn't find yourself saying "I hope *Burnout 4* does this!" the whole time... // **Chris Baker**

XBN 05 OUT OF TEN

GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Eye spy a seven out of 10

If you come into this new *GoldenEye* shooter hoping for a gripping, cinematic experience along the lines of Electronic Arts' last *James Bond* game, *Everything or Nothing*, you're setting yourself up for a disappointment of Timothy Dalton proportions. *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent*'s story, following a feud between rival archvillains Dr. No and Goldfinger, is as lightweight as it is silly. But who cares? What you should expect is action—riding a zip line between high-rises in the neon-lit Hong Kong night, blasting agents as you ride an elevator down the middle of a glitzy Vegas hotel, taking out tanks with a rocket launcher on top of Hoover Dam—that's what *Agent* delivers.

And thanks to the well-crafted enemy A.I. and unique powers you earn for your golden eye, even the less over-the-top single-player moments are enjoyable. Every room or hallway of bad guys holds plenty of possibilities: Want to charge at them with your shield engaged? Or take a hostage for use as a human shield instead? Maybe you could flip that switch with your psychic power and open the trapdoor beneath their feet? Or just shoot that explosive barrel behind them? (Predictable, sure, but still fun.) Bonuses awarded for killing in interesting ways further encourage you to vary your methods.

Whatever strategy you chose, enemies take cover, charge, and retreat well enough to keep you engaged. Plus, they constantly talk to each other ("Spread out." "He's got some kind of shield!" "He's behind that ledge!"), letting you know they're thinking.

Weapon choices help keep things exciting, adding a few interesting guns (a rail gun that shoots through walls, a remote-detonating mine launcher) to the standard arsenal.

The dual-wield ability works well, almost exactly as it does in Halo 2—each gun can be picked up and fired separately. As for the rest of the controls, once you change from the default setup (try Precision V2 instead), they feel solid. You'll be tossing grenades, switching weapons, ducking, and sniping with ease.

Just don't waste your time looking for the jump button—there isn't one. Like the original Nintendo 64 *GoldenEye*, *Agent* keeps your feet planted firmly on the ground, most likely in an attempt to keep things simple for a wider audience. It's strange at first, but outside of multiplayer (where it's sorely missed), you barely notice it after a few levels.

Graphically, *Agent* neither impresses nor disappoints. The levels include a wide variety of exotic locales with very few

GoldenEye meets Leadhead, and the blue sparks indicate a hit.

GoldenEye can access three separate powers with his artificial orb.

instances of repeating objects or rooms, but nothing that showcases nearly the amount of detail the Xbox is capable of. You can tell this game was made with the Sony PlayStation 2 and Nintendo GameCube in mind.

But the biggest splinter in this *GoldenEye* is exactly what everyone remembers so fondly about the Nintendo 64 original: multiplayer. You'd think the balance between the eye powers and the various traps built into the levels would make for a unique, thrilling online experience, and maybe it would, were everything else not so half-assed. You're limited to just eight players; changing modes requires everyone quitting every time; and many of the environments, ripped directly from the single-player game, just don't work well in multiplayer. Hell, you can't even choose which side to be on in team games. On the PlayStation 2, this is disappointing, but on the Xbox—where most games figured this stuff out over a year ago—it's inexcusable. //

Mark MacDonald

XBN 07
OUT OF TEN

TUG THIS!

In addition to your standard deathmatch, team deathmatch, and territories variations, *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* includes a rather unique online multiplayer mode: tug of war. Two teams race back and forth to a series of switches, trying to move some object (a warhead, train car, etc.) all the way to one side or the other. It's a great idea that's begging to be stolen by some other game company and developed in another title, where *Agent*'s lame maps and other online problems won't get in the way.

XTRA

OUT OF THE BOX

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TIPS AND TRICKS

Playing *Halo 2* on Legendary puts hairs on your chest

HALO 2

When it comes to *Halo 2* on Xbox Live, you're a multiplayer savant, a dual-wielding devil, and a terror with the energy sword. But somehow, you're humbled by the single-player campaign on Legendary difficulty. In fact, you can't even get off the space station in the first chapter of the game. Welcome to what *Halo* masochists call "the Legendary crawl," a hard-as-nails battle with the devious denizens of Bungie's world. Although notoriously difficult, playing *Halo 2* on Legendary showcases the game's ingenious combat A.I., as well as forces you to become aware of the clever level designs that many people gloss over as they push through the story. To help our legendary readers get through this time-consuming endeavor (expect to replay some of the checkpoints for hours at a time), *Xbox Nation* has compiled sage advice on how to defeat each of your Covenant

GRUNTS

The cannon fodder of the Covenant task force, these cute little grunts have come a long way from being the harmless playthings they were last time around. Although they're still easy to take down with a direct burst to the head or chest, grunts are now much tougher and more resourceful on Legendary. They're more aggressive and accurate with plasma grenades, they can take more damage (sometimes it takes up to three bursts from a battle rifle to drop 'em if you can't hit their vitals), and given the chance, they'll hop into turrets and vehicles to take you down. Always dispose of grunts first in any firefight to lessen your liabilities.

Best weapons to use: Magnum, SMG, battle rifle, grenades

JACKALS

Like grunts, jackals were nothing more than comic relief in the original *Halo*. Now, they're back with not just energy shields (which can still be shattered with a strong volley of bullets or plasma), but a nasty new toy as well: the beam rifle. Although manageable at point-blank range, if you nail 'em with melee attacks, their energy shields and sheer numbers may prove overwhelming at midrange. Keep them off your back by shooting any part of them first, then, as they double back to reveal themselves, pop bursts into their faces. The jackals that you really need to watch out for are the sniper variety, who have no qualms about abruptly ending your military career. No real trick there, except the occasionally trial-and-error process of pinpointing their locations and engaging in a sniper battle.

Best weapons to use: Battle rifle, carbine, sniper rifle, grenades

ELITES

By far your biggest threat in the original *Halo*, Elites remain resilient as ever with their recharging shields and smart tactical behavior. In *Halo 2*, Elites are still one of your most pressing concerns on any difficulty level. Not only are they aggressive with their dual-wielded plasma rifles, but they also work as a team to flush you out from behind cover during short and midrange scenarios. The key to spilling their blue blood lies in taking down their rechargeable shields, and the best way to do so is with energy-based weapons. When encountering Elites, always have a charged-up plasma pistol handy to strip their shields, and when they're stunned, quickly switch to your battle rifle and pump quick bursts into their heads. Other effective ways to take them down include sticking them with plasma grenades (either on their heads or just at their feet) or dual-wielding a plasma pistol with an SMG or magnum for a quick kill.

Best weapons to use: Plasma pistol, battle rifle, plasma grenades, energy sword

BRUTES

Seemingly invincible at first on Legendary, brutes are quite manageable, if you go into the fight with the right weapons. At long range, brutes aren't much different from Elites; they'll plug you any chance they get with their plasma rifles, and they're annoyingly accurate with their brute-shot grenades. But far off is where you'd ideally like to be when it comes to brutes. Set yourself up behind some cover, select a sniping weapon, and go for their heads. If you're a crack shot, it should take two simple hits (the first pops off a brute's helmet). This is by far the best way to deal with brutes. If you find yourself locked in a firefight with a group of brutes at mid to short range, try to isolate them with hit-and-run tactics. Since they aren't equipped with energy shields, use projectile-based weapons and aim for their heads; although it may take you an entire clip, know that they are taking damage, and unlike shields, health does not regenerate. If you're playing as the Arbiter, be sure to take advantage of your cloaking abilities to assassinate unsuspecting brutes with melee attacks.

Best weapons to use: Magnum, SMG, battle rifle, sniper rifle, plasma grenades, energy sword

DRONES

Pitifully underutilized in *Halo 2*'s single-player campaign, these awesome new enemies acquire strength through superior numbers. At mid to long range (usually the distance from which you'll first spot them), drones can be easily dealt with by using precision-based weapons (sniper, beam, and battle rifles, and the Covenant carbine). It's best to deal with drones as soon as they appear on the horizon, before they get the chance to scatter, hide, and take you out with potshots and ambushes. Too bad drones don't play a more prominent role in the Covenant's arsenal.

Best weapons to use: Plasma pistol, battle rifle, plasma grenades

HUNTERS

Rule No. 1 when it comes to hunters: stay on the move. Their hand cannons have the power to crush your shields with one swift beam, and they can cover a lot of ground and close in fast when they perform their shoulder charge. Although there's no easy, surefire way to take these suckers down, the thing to do is strafe them while you're out of the way of their melee attacks and shoot them (dual-wield for twice the damage) in the exposed pink parts of their bodies behind their backs. Be careful not to get too close when you do so, as hunters now possess a melee attack that hits enemies behind them. Other ways of hurting hunters include sticking plasma grenades behind their backs or eliminating them with one well-placed shot from a sniper or beam rifle.

Best weapons to use: Magnum, SMG, battle rifle, sniper rifle, plasma grenades

STUFF

Sure, you can afford it

1. VOLTAIC BACKPACK

$229

http://www.voltaicsystems.com

Become a walking power outlet: Three aluminum-panel solar cells are embedded along the back of this pack, along with enough wires and in-seam connections to charge most small devices. In direct sunlight, you can bring a phone back up to full strength in about six hours—and it looks good.

1

2. QRIO

$65,000

http://www.sony.com/QRIO

In "the future" (read: Japan), Sony has solidified the fact that the robot apocalypse is nigh. QRIO walks up stairs, plays fetch with your dog, knows where it is via stereoscopic cameras in its eyes, and even has intelligent conversations with you. Easily one of the most stunning pieces of technology we've ever seen.

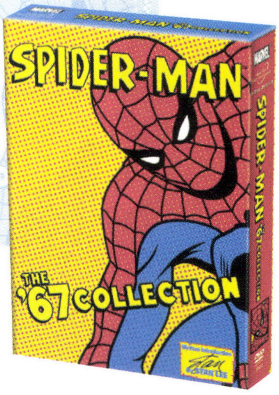
2

3. SPIDER-MAN: THE '67 COLLECTION

$50.99

http://www.bvhe.com

The 1960s brought us free love, unwashed hippies, and the totally psychedelic Spider-Man cartoons. Now Buena Vista Home Entertainment makes it possible to relive this turbulent decade, minus the stinging pot haze, with the six-volume *Spider-Man: The '67 Collection* DVD box set. It includes 53 totally freaky episodes and enough wacky villains to clog a whole weekend.



3

4. HALO 2 ACTION FIGURES

$14.99-$17.99

http://www.joyridestudios.com

The war continues, and Joyride Studios is there to capture it with all-new ultracool *Halo 2* action figures. The first wave of *Halo 2* toys includes a Master Chief with new Mjolnir Mark VI armor, an enormous Covenant Brute, and a Warthog with gauss cannon that comes packed with a mini-Master Chief and a tiny marine.

4

ESSENTIAL **SELECTION**

Xbox Nation picks the 50 best Xbox games to date

Halo 2

Dev.: Bungie Pub.: Microsoft

We like: Non-stop action, improved looks and cut-scenes that work.

We don't like: Repeated Repeated textures textures.

10 OUT OF TEN

Halo

Dev.: Bungie Pub.: Microsoft

We like: Launch titles that rule, as well as season three of *Red vs. Blue*.

We don't like: Endless fights with The Flood in vast identical geometric rooms.

10 OUT OF TEN

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

Dev.: Ubisoft Montreal Pub.: Ubisoft

We like: Revisits that do justice to the originals.

We don't like: Being bum-rushed by demons you can't tell apart.

10 OUT OF TEN

Grand Theft Auto Double Pack

Dev.: Rockstar Vienna Pub.: Rockstar Games

We like: Two-for-one deals. Fingers on our hands. Straight thugging.

We don't like: Public outcry about declining morals in videogames.

10 OUT OF TEN

Steel Battalion

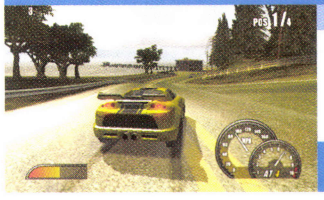
Dev.: Capcom Pub.: Capcom

We like: Innovation and unapologetically huge controllers.

We don't like: Not reaching the Eject button in time and having saves wiped.

10 OUT OF TEN

Burnout 3: Takedown



Dev.: Criterion Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Being awarded medals for our road rage, instead of being thrown in jail.

We don't like: Lamers who ditch matches when it looks like they're about to lose.

10 OUT OF TEN

Ninja Gaiden

Dev.: Tecmo Pub.: Tecmo

We like: Reinvestigation of classic gameplay style with updated tech polish.

We don't like: Cameras that don't allow for adjustment during dicey moves.

9 OUT OF TEN

Soul Calibur II

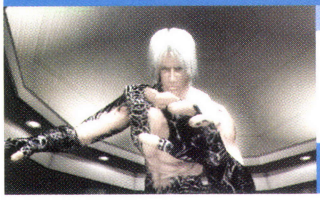
Dev.: Namco Pub.: Namco

We like: Finally getting our hands on a good, playable *Spawn*. Virtually, that is.

We don't like: Having to unlock Seung Mina and Sophitia.

9 OUT OF TEN

Breakdown



Dev.: Namco Pub.: Namco

We like: Flexing our long-unused *Punch-Out!* skills, this time in the proper setting.

We don't like: Amnesia as a plot device, no matter how effective it may be.

9 OUT OF TEN

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

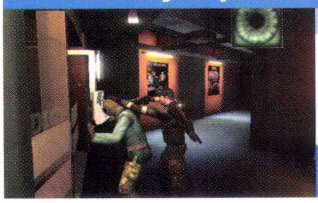
Dev.: BioWare Pub.: LucasArts

We like: Choices that affect your appearance, possible Jedidom.

We don't like: Occasional graphical glitches, but they're pretty minor.

9 OUT OF TEN

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow



Dev.: Ubisoft Shanghai Pub.: Ubisoft

We like: An online component that doesn't feel like a half-assed afterthought.

We don't like: Getting busted by the randomizer, not our lack of skillz.

9 OUT OF TEN

Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

Dev.: Starbreeze Studios Pub.: Vivendi Universal

We like: Astonishingly palatable voice acting, motion capture, and detail.

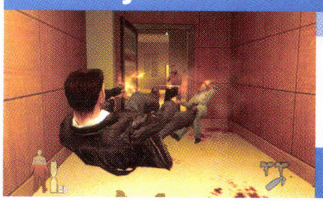
We don't like: Kung fu-style dubs—unless we're watching kung fu movies.

9 OUT OF TEN

XTRA

ESSENTIAL SELECTION

Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne



Dev.: Remedy Pub.: Rockstar Games

We like: Bullet time and hard-boiled stuff. You know, like eggs and cops.

We don't like: How quickly it's all over—although preferable to the alternative.

9 OUT OF TEN

Project Gotham Racing 2

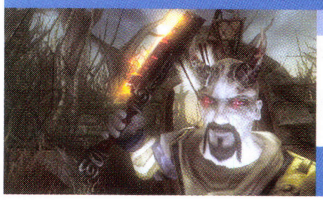
Dev.: Bizarre Creations Pub.: Microsoft

We like: Seamless, sensible integration with Xbox Live, even in single player.

We don't like: Relentless A.I. opponents and strictly stock options for your ride.

9 OUT OF TEN

Fable



Dev.: Big Blue Box Pub.: Microsoft

We like: Freedom to be who we want, and going fishing.

We don't like: Uninspired boss battles, some lame puzzles, and controller issues.

9 OUT OF TEN

The Sims: Bustin' Out

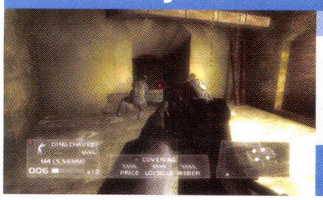
Dev.: Maxis Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: A so-called life that's more exciting and fun than our real lives.

We don't like: Watching an incontinent little computer person have an "accident."

9 OUT OF TEN

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3



Dev.: Ubisoft Montreal Pub.: Ubisoft

We like: Hyper-realism in our tactical shooters. And saying the word 'tactical'.

We don't like: Being cussed at by h4x0rs two states, and thirty IQ points away.

9 OUT OF TEN

FIFA Soccer 2005

Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Twelve thousand freaking players! Oh, and passing and stuff.

We don't like: That soccer games don't get the attention they deserve.

9 OUT OF TEN

Need for Speed Underground

Dev.: Black Box Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Tweaking our rides out with endless options (custom window tints? Sure. Electronic Bondo in action) and not having to worry about five-oh.

We don't like: Quantum collisions, occasionally iffy framerates, and an endless supply of money. Bet you never thought you'd hear that, huh?

9 OUT OF TEN

Metal Arms: Glitch in the System

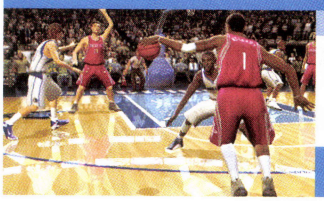
Dev.: Swingin' Ape Studios Pub.: Vivendi Universal

We like: Unrepentant cutesiness, as long as it's accompanied by good gameplay.

We don't like: No online support—not even a little.

9 OUT OF TEN

NBA Live 2005



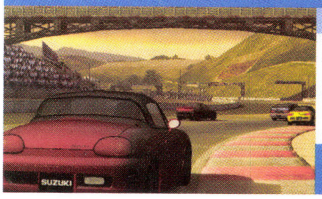
Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Gratification, immediate and in the form of distilled dunking debauchery.

We don't like: Graphics polish which isn't quite up to par with its contemporaries.

9 OUT OF TEN

Sega GT Online



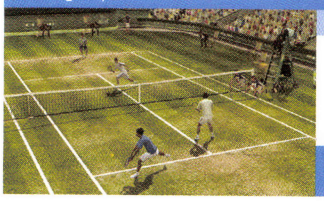
Dev.: Wow Entertainment Pub.: Sega

We like: That it's 20 bucks and sports sick online tricks.

We don't like: That it's sort of an updated version of last year's game.

9 OUT OF TEN

Top Spin



Dev.: Power and Magic Pub.: Microsoft

We like: Tennis games that are really RPGs in drag. Shh! Don't tell.

We don't like: Reading about tennis. Unless DF Wallace is doing the writing.

9 OUT OF TEN

RalliSport Challenge 2

Dev.: Dice Pub.: Microsoft

We like: Being out in nature, so long as it's in a car and contributing to erosion.

We don't like: That there never seem to be any stereos in these things.

9 OUT OF TEN

Fight Night 2004

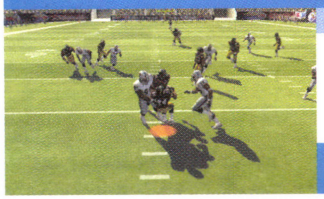
Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Being electronically dissuaded from ever stepping into a ring ourselves.

We don't like: Having to wait this long for a boxing game that's not a masher.

9 OUT OF TEN

Madden NFL 2005



Dev.: Electronic Arts Tiburon Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Exacting, demanding, and rewarding improvements over last year.

We don't like: An online component that is only just adequate.

9 OUT OF TEN

Tony Hawk's Underground 2

Dev.: Neversoft Pub.: Activision

We like: Story modes with actual stories and unlockable goodies strewn about.

We don't like: That we can't seem to find a game sans bullet time these days.

9 OUT OF TEN

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

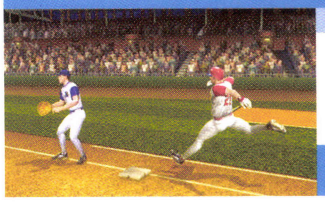
Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Cinematic and lavishly produced videogame excellence.

We don't like: Feeling like we're being talked down to.

9 OUT OF TEN

MVP Baseball 2004



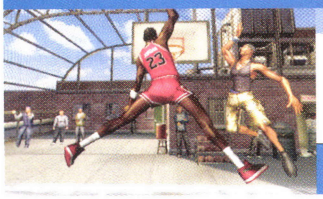
Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Venting our frustrations on scrubs like the Tulsa Drillers.

We don't like: Having to unlock vintage outfits—what's up with that?

9 OUT OF TEN

NBA Street Vol. 2



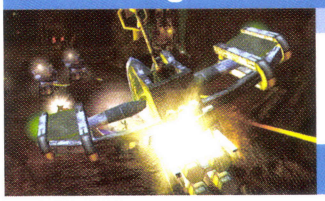
Dev.: Electronic Arts Canada Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Shammie-shams, heads or tails, cook 'ems, foie gras, and getting bent.

We don't like: Not being able to listen to ABBA or Morbid Angel while dunking.

9 OUT OF TEN

Panzer Dragoon Orta



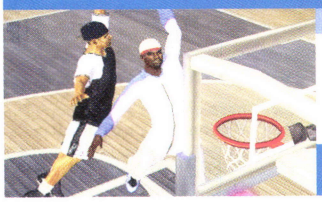
Dev.: Smilebit Pub.: Sega

We like: Being on rails—when the rails rule this much. Prequels don't hurt, either.

We don't like: Confined spaces with willful cameras and tough enemies.

9 OUT OF TEN

NBA Ballers



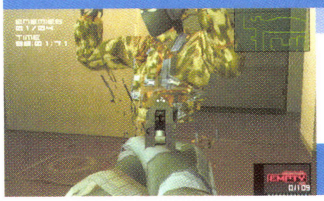
Dev.: Midway Pub.: Midway

We like: 1-on-1 matches in exotic locations with our dunking avatars.

We don't like: 1-on-0, 0-on-1, or 0-on-0 offline solitude.

9 OUT OF TEN

Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance



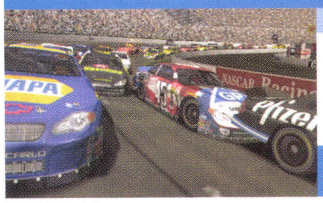
Dev.: Konami Pub.: Konami

We like: As much *Metal Gear* as we can get our grubby little meat hooks on.

We don't like: Slowdown that has no earthly business in an Xbox game.

9 OUT OF TEN

NASCAR Thunder 2004



Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

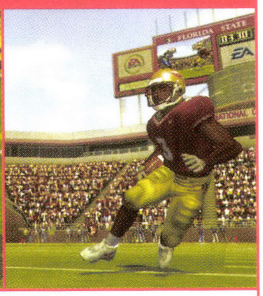
We like: Adaptive (comparatively), intelligent opponents who hold grudges.

We don't like: Very many other NASCAR games.

9 OUT OF TEN

NCAA Football 2005

Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts



We like: Finally getting to play an EA game on Xbox Live. Retaining our electronic composure while getting booed in an away game.

We don't like: Commentators who irritate and are strangely...er, homoerotic. Seriously. Listen to it.

9 OUT OF TEN

SSX 3

Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Series that haven't started to suck. Quite the opposite, actually.

We don't like: Sounding like a broken record, but we'd really like *SSX* on Live.

9 OUT OF TEN

ESPN NFL 2K5

Dev.: Visual Concepts Pub.: Sega

We like: Having the option to train players in leadership, Pilates, or yoga.

We don't like: Playing in front of crowds of 70,000 that have a combined IQ of 35.

9 OUT OF TEN

NHL 2005

Dev.: Electronic Arts Pub.: Electronic Arts

We like: Having a face-off playbook and control on the open ice.

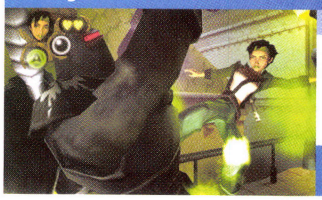
We don't like: Wack views that each interfere in their own special way.

9 OUT OF TEN

XTRA

ESSENTIAL SELECTION

Beyond Good & Evil



Dev.: Ubisoft Pub.: Ubisoft

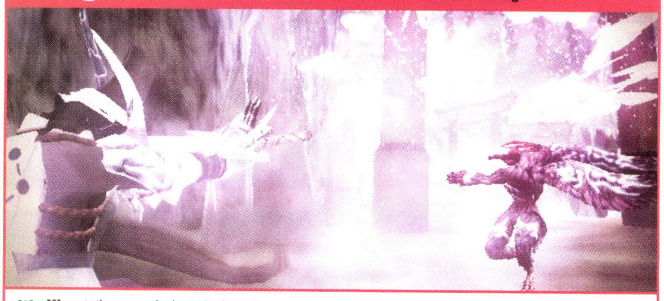
We like: Charm, grace, Rastafarian rhinoceroses, and photojournalists.

We don't like: Insta-Boss® brand final bosses and letdowns at the end.

9 OUT OF TEN

Otogi 2: Immortal Warriors

Dev.: From Software Pub.: Sega

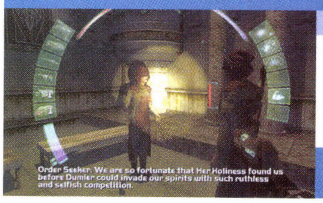


We like: When gods battle it out and their endeavors are endowed with the luster that comes only from developers demonstrating genuine fondness for their labors.

We don't like: That despite its brilliance, *Otogi 2* will suffer the same commercial fate of its predecessor.

9 OUT OF TEN

Deus Ex: Invisible War



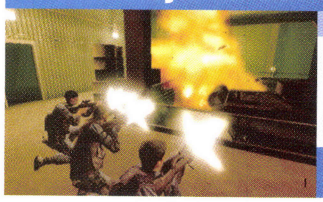
Dev.: Ion Storm Pub.: Eidos

We like: Newtonian mechanics made flesh. And consequences. Sometimes.

We don't like: The idea of predestination.

8 OUT OF TEN

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow



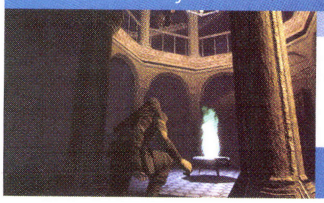
Dev.: Ubisoft Pub.: Ubisoft

We like: New online features, complete with squad-permission-level discipline.

We don't like: Being sold incremental improvements for the price of a full game.

8 OUT OF TEN

Thief: Deadly Shadows



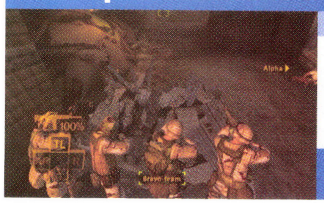
Dev.: Ion Storm Pub.: Eidos

We like: Sneaking around in the shadows. Hiding in shadows. Shadows in general.

We don't like: Not being able to see our hands in front of our faces.

8 OUT OF TEN

Full Spectrum Warrior



Dev.: Pandemic Studios Pub.: THQ

We like: Unparalleled military authenticity, courtesy of your tax dollars.

We don't like: Our pawn's-eye view interfering with the real action.

8 OUT OF TEN

Guilty Gear X2 #Reload: The Midnight Carnival

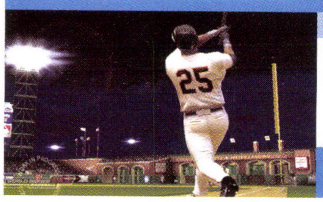
Dev.: Arc System Works Pub.: Majesco

We like: Online 2D brawling done right, without concessions and with depth.

We don't like: The kibosh put on our mad turtling skills with attack meter drains.

9 OUT OF TEN

World Series Baseball 2K3



Dev.: Blue Shift Pub.: Sega

We like: Exhaustive research and attention to detail.

We don't like: A franchise mode that's detail-heavy to a fault.

9 OUT OF TEN

Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon

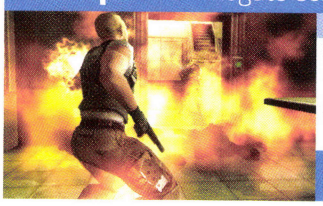
Dev.: Revolution Pub.: The Adventure Company

We like: Any videogame with the Knights Templar in it.

We don't like: Poverty, chastity, obedience. Okay, maybe obedience.

8 OUT OF TEN

Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy



Dev.: Midway Pub.: Midway

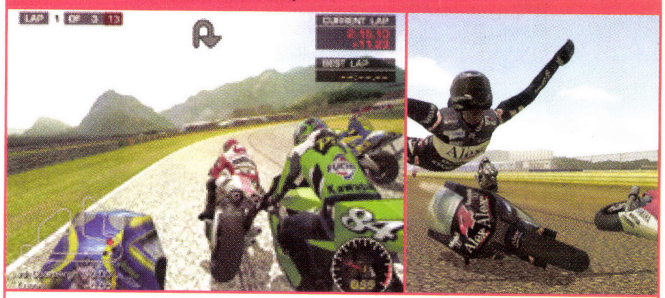
We like: Crushing foes who would call our psychic powers wussy.

We don't like: Banality in all of its forms, especially in contrast to good gameplay.

8 OUT OF TEN

MotoGP 2

Dev.: Climax Pub.: THQ



We like: Authenticity and believability in a motorcycle videogame, *Gran Turismo* style.

We don't like: Unforgiving, if occasionally spectacular, physics and plain-old difficulty.

8 OUT OF TEN

Star Wars Battlefront

Dev.: Pandemic Pub.: LucasArts

We like: Having action-figure battles the way they were meant to be played.

We don't like: Stump-dumb AI essentially requiring an Xbox Live account.

8 OUT OF TEN

AMENDED

United States Postal Service

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

1. Publication Title	2. Publication Number	3. Filing Date
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15. Extent and Nature of Circulation	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total Number of Copies *(Net press run)*	135,821	248,082
b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation (1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 *(Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)*	51,493	109,550
(2) Paid In-County Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 *(Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)*		
(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution	17,850	28,600
(4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS		
c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation *(Sum of 15b. (1), (2),(3),and (4))* ▶	69,343	138,158
d. Free Distribution by Mail *(Samples, complimentary, and other free)* (1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541	7,173	15,632
(2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541		
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e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail *(Carriers or other means)*		
f. Total Free Distribution *(Sum of 15d. and 15e.)* ▶	7,173	15,632
g. Total Distribution *(Sum of 15c. and 15f)* ▶	76,515	153,790
h. Copies not Distributed	59,306	94,292
i. Total *(Sum of 15g. and h.)* ▶	135,821	248,082
j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation *(15c. divided by 15g. times 100)*	90.63%	89.84%

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☐ Publication required. Will be printed in the January 2005 issue of this publication. ☐ Publication not required.

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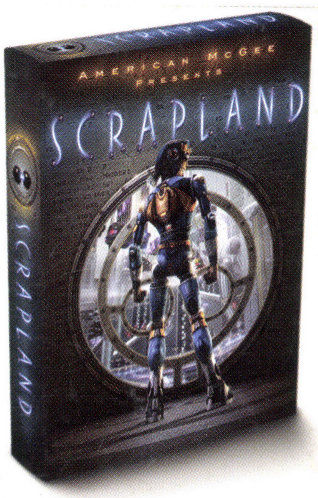

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